





Bampton lectures

SCC
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EIGHT SERMONS

PREACHED BEFORE THE
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD,

IN THE YEAR 1799,

AT THE

LECTURE

FOUNDED BY THE REV. JOHN BAMPTON, M.A.
LATE CANON OF SALISBURY.

BY WILLIAM BARROW,
OF QUEEN'S COLLEGE, LL.D. AND F.S.A.

C. Lucilius dicere solebat, ea, quæ scriberet, neque se ab doctissimis, neque ab indoctissimis, legi velle; quòd alteri nihil intelligerent, alteri plus fortasse quàm ipse.

CIC. DE ORAT. LIB. II. 6.

LONDON:
PRINTED FOR F. AND C. RIVINGTON, N° 62, ST. PAUL'S
CHURCH-YARD. SOLD ALSO BY J. HATCHARD, PICCADILLY;
AND BY J. COOKE, AND HANWELL AND PARKER, OXFORD.

1799.



*Extract from the last Will and Testament of
the late Rev. JOHN BAMPTON,
Canon of Salisbury.*

— “ I give and bequeath my Lands and
“ Estates to the Chancellor, Masters, and Scho-
“ lars of the University of Oxford for ever, to
“ have and to hold all and singular the said
“ Land or Estates upon trust, and to the intents
“ and purposes hereinafter mentioned; that is
“ to say, I will and appoint, that the Vice-Chan-
“ cellor of the University of Oxford for the time
“ being shall take and receive all the rents, issues,
“ and profits thereof, and (after all taxes, repara-
“ tions, and necessary deductions made) that he
“ pay all the remainder to the endowment of eight
“ Divinity Lecture Sermons, to be established for
“ ever in the said University, and to be performed
“ in the manner following.

“ I direct and appoint, that upon the first Tues-
“ day in Easter Term, a Lecturer be yearly chosen
“ by the Heads of Colleges only, and by no others,
“ in the room adjoining to the Printing-House,
“ between the hours of ten in the morning and two
“ in the afternoon, to preach eight Divinity Lec-
“ ture Sermons, the year following, at St. Mary’s
“ in Oxford, between the commencement of the
“ last month in Lent Term, and the end of the
“ third week in Act Term.

“ Also I direct and appoint, that the eight
“ Divinity Lecture Sermons shall be preached
“ upon either of the following subjects—to con-
“ firm and establish the Christian Faith, and to

“ confute all heretics and schifmatics—upon the
 “ divine authority of the Holy Scriptures—upon
 “ the authority of the writings of the primitive
 “ Fathers, as to the faith and practice of the pri-
 “ mitive Church—upon the Divinity of our Lord
 “ and Saviour Jefus Chrift—upon the Divinity of
 “ the Holy Ghoft—upon the Articles of the Chri-
 “ tian Faith, as comprehended in the Apoftles’
 “ and Nicene Creeds.

“ Also I direct that thirty copies of the eight
 “ Divinity Lecture Sermons fhall be always
 “ printed, within two months after they are
 “ preached, and one copy fhall be given to the
 “ Chancellor of the Univerfity, and one copy
 “ to the head of every College, and one copy
 “ to the Mayor of the city of Oxford, and one
 “ copy to be put into the Bodleian Library; and
 “ the expence of printing them fhall be paid out
 “ of the revenue of the Lands or Eftates given
 “ for eftablifhing the Divinity Lecture Sermons;
 “ and the Preacher fhall not be paid, nor be en-
 “ titled to the revenue, before they are printed.

“ Also I direct and appoint, that no perfon
 “ fhall be qualified to preach the Divinity Lecture
 “ Sermons, unlefs he hath taken the Degree of
 “ Mafter of Arts at leaft, in one of the two Uni-
 “ verfities of Oxford or Cambridge; and that the
 “ fame perfon fhall never preach the Divinity
 “ Lecture Sermons twice.”

ADVERTISEMENT.

AS these Discourses are now to appear before the Public, I beg leave to introduce them to the Reader by a few previous observations; that my design may be clearly understood; and the merit of the execution, whatever it may be, estimated upon its proper grounds. I think it also incumbent upon me to explain to the *Heads of Colleges*, who did me the honour to nominate me to the appointment, why these disquisitions appear to be calculated more perhaps for the Public, than the University; why I have written, rather Sermons for general perusal, than lectures for a learned Society.

I have directed my arguments and my advice, such as they are, where I thought they were most likely to be of use. When the Sermons were delivered from the pulpit, I wished them to be understood as addressed more particularly to the younger students of Oxford; believing that the same style and manner would not be unfuitable to those, by whom I should afterwards wish them to be read. For it is almost needless to observe, that like those of my predecessors in the appointment, they were always intended for publication; and are now to be considered principally in that point of view.

I have not attempted to instruct those already learned in theology; for they want no assistance that I am able to give them; nor have I written for the lowest and least informed members
of

of society, for they must be taught their religious doctrines and duties by modes of instruction more expeditious and familiar than the study of books of controversy. But between these two extremes are various and numerous classes of the community; men of some education, curiosity, and reading, though in very different proportions; and perhaps above all others, men of integrity, candour and docility. To the prudence, the spirit and the virtue of these men, we must probably owe, under Providence, whatever permanency we are to enjoy in our religious or our civil constitution: and what various attempts have lately been made to seduce them from their attachment to both, by insidious and popular publications of almost every possible size and form, it is not necessary to state; the fact is equally known and lamented. While therefore I have endeavoured to adapt
my

my reasoning and my language to men of this description, in order to confirm them not only in their belief of the Christian religion, but in their adherence to its establishment in the church of England, I hope I shall stand excused to the University for the plan I have pursued; because I trust it is fairly implied in the purposes for which the lecture was intended and appointed.

It is for this reason that I have entered but sparingly and superficially into any points of biblical learning; or any metaphysical questions of theology. I have not pursued my arguments through all their various branches and collateral distinctions and dependencies; but hastened by what appeared to me the shortest and easiest way to my conclusion; and have sometimes given rather the result of reasoning, than its detail. I have not laboured to be eloquent;

quent; but to be perspicuous. I have not intentionally disguised my own ignorance or doubts in obscure or ambiguous language; but endeavoured to be decided and explicit; that as far as my reasoning is conclusive, it may have its effect; and as far as it is erroneous, it may be refuted. Instead of crowding my margin with notes of reference in ostentation of learning, I have purposely omitted them; wherever the quotation was not considered as of essential importance. Nothing distracts the attention so much as the perpetual recurrence of notes of reference; and an ordinary reader seldom turns to a second book, because he was directed to it in the margin of the first.

To the learned, indeed, my quotations are all familiar; and to the unlearned references would be of little use.

For

For a reason of the same kind I have not been careful to point out the sources from whence my arguments have been drawn. But as there is a most offensive injustice in borrowing from a living author without acknowledgment; I feel it incumbent upon me to state, that for the train of reasoning in sect. 7, of Sermon VI; and in I. 6, and II. 3, of Sermon VIII, I am indebted to a writer, to whom Christianity itself is greatly indebted, the Rev. Dr. PALEY, the present Subdean of the Cathedral Church of Lincoln.

The objections I have endeavoured to meet, are some of those which I have reason to believe are at present the most prevalent and popular. It is true that in these objections there is no novelty; and probably as little in the answers. But should they have been urged a thousand times before, and a thousand times

times refuted; ftill as long as they continue to operate, fo long will it be our duty to oppofe them. A recent publication too may be read; when one of older date is unknown or neglected. A treatife professedly technical, of whatever merit, will fometimes excite difguft; while one more familiar and fuperficial will attract attention, and perhaps bring conviction. A fmaller volume will be taken up, when a larger would frighten indolence away.

This felection of various objections has in a great meafure prevented, what moft of my predeceffors in the appointment have ftudioufly and laudably followed, an unity of defign, and regularity in their plan. The points which I have confidered could have only a more lax and general connection. But if the fubjects have been unwifely chofen, the want of unity is but a fmall
aggra-

aggravation of the first error; and if they have been chosen well, the defect will be excused. It had been an easier task to fix upon a single question, and pursue it throughout. But this would have been to pursue a different purpose; to write for a different description of readers. It might indeed have produced a work more classical and scholar like; but it could have had no effect upon the people; for by them it would not have been read.

As each of these objections is treated as much as possible independently of the rest; as several of them must be refuted on the same general grounds; as they all relate to the same general subject; and all naturally terminate in the same point; it is probable that similar sentiments and observations are too frequently repeated. In some places indeed I have risked the weakening of

my argument to prevent it: But in others it was preferred to referring the reader to what had been said before, or what was to be said afterwards; and in others still, it was found impossible to be avoided.

A few occasional notes have been subjoined; where it was thought necessary further to illustrate or enforce what had been more concisely or cursorily stated in the Sermons.

If the apologies of an author could procure any real indulgence for the imperfections of his work; it might be very justly stated, that these Sermons are produced under at least one peculiar disadvantage. They have been wholly written at such intervals of leisure as could be found amidst the duties of a profession, of which the labour and anxiety are alone sufficient to employ

ploy all the hours of the most active, and all the faculties of the most capacious, mind. But however important such circumstances may appear to the writer ; they are of little consequence to the reader.

Having been prevailed upon to undertake the task, I have performed it as well as my situation and abilities would permit. The Public, I believe, are always candid, and eventually just. If the Sermons deserve notice, they will obtain it. If they deserve it not, it cannot materially affect me. As an individual, I have no interest to serve by them ; as a writer, I can have no reputation to lose.

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II. Christianity has produced good effects upon the faith and morals of its professors. 1. It has improved our religion. 2. It has placed morality on a basis of universality. 3. Rectified the public judgment in morals. 4. Ameliorated the principles of civil policy. 5. Softened the horrors of war. 6. And abolished the combats of the gladiators. 7. Specific instances of improved morality. 8. Comparative advantages of Christianity over philosophy—General conclusion.

SERMON I.

ON THE VARIETY OF OPINIONS AND
TENETS IN RELIGION.

MATT. x. 34.

Think not that I am come to send peace on earth; I came not to send peace, but a sword.

WERE we to form a comparison between the course of nature and the conduct of men, and to attempt to reason from the one to the other, we should continually find our analogies imperfect, and our conclusions erroneous. In the course of nature, as far at least as our observations and experiments have enabled us to discover it, we perceive a system the most regular and consistent, effects corresponding to their causes with the most unbroken uniformity. When matter acts upon matter, the event varies only with variation in the circumstances of the case:

the rapidity or duration of motion is always proportioned to the power by which it is produced; and the elements in their operations never violate the laws of their nature and situation. *The moon is appointed for certain seasons, and the sun knoweth his going down.* For this uniformity of nature, we perceive one important reason in its utility; in the advantages we derive from it, we acknowledge the wisdom and goodness of the Creator. It is upon this that physical truth admits demonstration; that the human intellect arrives at certainty; and that all our improvements in art and science have been made. Upon his experience of this uniformity, the mechanist constructs his engine, and employs it; the husbandman cultivates the ground; the mariner navigates the ocean; and in a word, men every where pursue their ordinary occupations, and supply the daily wants of life.

But when we examine the principles and the actions of men, in a moral view, we continually find what appears to us irregularity, confusion, and inconsistency. Our knowledge of human nature rises only to
opinion;

opinion; we mistake characters and motives; and we are able to judge of future events only by conjecture and probability. We have indeed been told, by the advocates of the doctrine of necessity, that the mind of man is as mechanical in its thoughts and actions as his person; that it is determined in all cases by the irresistible influence of the prevailing motive; and that were we sufficiently acquainted with it, we should perceive all its exertions and effects proceeding from their respective causes, with as much uniformity, as the most ordinary operations of nature. But till this necessity and uniformity shall be proved to exist, and their influence rendered intelligible to us, it cannot be unfair to assume as real that irregularity, which has all the appearance, and all the consequences and mischiefs of reality. In human conduct visible effects are often very disproportionate to visible causes; and exertions, both in good and ill, are much more feeble or forcible than the motives by which they appear to be prompted. From our freedom of will, and consequently of action, and from the impetuosity, the combination, and the caprices of

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our passions, it perpetually happens, that calculation is disappointed, that argument or testimony does not produce conviction, or that conviction does not influence practice; that men frequently misapprehend the conduct of others, and have reason to lament their own.

In common with every thing else, in which mankind have been concerned, the reception of divine revelation has been affected by the weakness of our nature, and the inconsistencies of our opinions and conduct; and affected too in proportion to the extent and importance of the object. In no other case does it appear, that argument and evidence have had less influence according to their natural weight; on no other subject have there been, in speculative points, greater errors in reasoning, and greater variety of opinions; or in practice, a wider difference between the effects that have actually been produced, and those which might reasonably have been expected. When the nature of revelation, as represented in scripture, is considered and understood; when the equity, the perspicuity, and the sanctions of

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of its precepts, the value of its blessings, and the gracious terms on which they are offered, are duly weighed, we might naturally expect that it would every where be heard with attention and favour, and engage universal assent and obedience; that it would indeed silence for ever the voice of discord and hostility, and unite all the sons of men in piety, charity, and peace. Yet, in reality, such would be the conclusion of him only, who had consulted speculation rather than experience, and who had attended more to the regular operations of nature, than to the caprices of the human heart.

Our Redeemer, *who knew what was in man*, foretold very different effects from his religion; and subsequent events have abundantly verified his predictions. *Think not*, says he, *that I am come to send peace on earth; I came not to send peace, but a sword.* In this, however, he must be understood to express, not the design and purpose of his appearance upon earth, but its accidental consequences; what would arise, not from any imperfection in his revelation, but from human weaknesses and passions. As if he had

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said,

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said, though the gospel is intended by its author, and calculated by its nature, to produce benevolence and peace among men; yet will its rejection or perversion be too often the occasion of animosity and contention, persecution and bloodshed. *An enemy hath sown tares among the wheat, and they have often choaked the good seed. When the Lord of the vineyard looked that it should bring forth grapes, it brought forth wild grapes.*

Why there has arisen so great a variety of opinions and tenets in religion; why so many unbecoming controversies have divided its professors; and why the publication of the gospel has been followed by events so much to be lamented, a few of the principal causes shall be concisely stated and explained. And such a statement, it is presumed, may not only tend to counteract the unfair use that is sometimes made in argument of these unhappy dissensions; but will form no unfavourable introduction to the examination of some of those objections, that have been urged against the necessity or the credibility of the gospel itself.

1. Supposing for a moment, what our scriptures teach us is true, that the whole human race are descended from a single pair; and that these were at first favoured with such instruction from heaven, as was suited to their situation and capacity: admitting, also, what seems immediately to follow from the supposition, that religion was derived originally from a divine revelation, still might a great variety of opinions on the subject be reasonably expected amongst mankind, from the natural effects of their encrease and separation, of their distance from each other in time and place. As men became divided into different tribes and nations, and dispersed into the various regions of the earth, and while their records were little else than oral tradition, truths would be not only incorrectly transmitted to distant countries, but even in the same imperfectly preserved. To this let us add the effects of national pride, anxious to be thought the author of the doctrines it professes; and of national hatred, studious to differ from the institutions of its enemies; and we shall then see one fertile source of that variety of religious systems, which have been established in the world;

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nor shall we be surpris'd to find these systems so far changed and corrupted, as to shew their genuine original only in some obscure remains of a few fundamental truths, or in the faint traces of a few primeval rites and ceremonies.

2. When the gospel was first offered to mankind, many of its doctrines appeared so novel in themselves, and many of its precepts so hostile to worldly interests and passions; the one so much to contradict received opinions, and the other to condemn established practices; that there was every reason to expect, what is well known to have happened, that it would find, not candour or favour, but enmity and opposition. It censured alike the *science falsely so called*, and the corruption of morals; the speculations of the philosopher, and the superstitions of the people. It had, therefore, to contend with the various difficulties thrown in its way by the ignorance of the illiterate, and the ingenuity of the learned; by the vices of the sensual, and the authority of the powerful. Its claim to a divine original was disputed or denied. Its teachers were despised and insulted.

insulted. It was opposed at the same time by argument, and by persecution. But there was yet another consequence of the novelty of the doctrines of the gospel, which I would more particularly point out, as more particularly the cause of that variety of opinions and tenets, for which I am endeavouring to account. Those doctrines, even by such as were disposed to receive them, were often misunderstood and misapplied, from a propensity at once very natural and very fallacious, a propensity to suppose them analogous to something already known, and to interpret them consistently with notions already familiar to their minds. One class of believers wished to unite them with the rites and ceremonies of the law of Moses; another, to reconcile them to the superstitions of the heathens; and a third, to assimilate them to the theories of the Greek philosophy. Thus did difference of opinion begin with the very beginning of Christianity: even in the times of the apostles, or early afterwards, in almost every church they had established, were found divisions, heresies, and factions.

3. A vari-

3. A variety of opinions is found on every other subject to which human attention has been directed. From the different constitutions of the minds of men, from their different habits of thinking, and different degrees of capacity, diligence, or candour, the same argument produces very different effects upon them; the same object strikes them in very different points of view. The theories of medicine, the principles of civil policy, and even the arts of the husbandman and the manufacturer, still furnish materials for difference of opinion, for disquisition and dispute. It is hence that we have, on one hand, the temporary evils indeed, of disputation and controversy, aggravated too often by personal animosity and illiberal reproach; but on the other, the substantial advantages of enquiry and discovery, conviction, and truth. Why then should we be surpris'd at the want of unanimity in religion, of uniformity in opinions and faith*?

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* It may be objected that this comparison is not complete, and consequently the argument founded upon it not conclusive. In the case of medicine or civil policy there is no divine revelation. Admitted. But the similitude

It must be observed too, that religion is not in its own nature an object of indifference, which every man is at liberty to receive or to neglect, as may best suit his convenience and inclination. It is not, like many other branches of science, a pursuit, on which one class of men depend for their subsistence or their fame, and in which others have only a remote and incidental concern. But it is a subject which, from its superior importance and universal interest, will require and will excite very general and very serious attention; on which almost every man, who thinks at all, will think it incumbent upon him to form an opinion for himself, to fix his principles and his faith. It is a subject too of extent and difficulty equal to its importance. It reveals truths, which with the utmost exertion of our faculties we can but imperfectly comprehend; and teaches the general and fundamental principles of

still holds far enough to answer the purpose for which it is employed. The genuineness, the authenticity, the inspiration, or the age of each of the different books of scripture may be disputed, like the soundness of the theories of Hippocrates or Plato; and the language of the former, as well as of the latter, may be interpreted in various senses, and with various limitations.

our conduct, in all the multifarious relations of moral and social life. No wonder then its doctrines are variously understood, and its precepts variously applied. No wonder it has given rise to so many different sects of so many different denominations.

4. At no great distance from what has just been pointed out, may be traced another source of this variety of opinions and tenets in religion. In the truths of revelation, as in the productions of nature, the Creator has left something to be done by ourselves, before we can enjoy the full advantage of his bounty. The mine must be dug before we can obtain the treasure it contains; the field must be cultivated before we can reap the harvest; and all our knowledge is the effect and the reward of attention and study. Thus it is with the blessings of the gospel. They are not obvious at first sight in their full magnitude and splendour. Without some degree of application and care, they cannot be understood; much less can they be obtained and enjoyed. The faculties, which our Creator has given us, he intended we should employ, and employ them
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for our own good, in pursuit of that knowledge, virtue, and happiness which he has in his mercy set before us.

For this indeed, a very important reason may be assigned. The blessing, which is purchased with little difficulty, is usually enjoyed with as little gratitude and satisfaction. In science, what is self-evident, or superficial, we are apt to despise: but we place a high value on the effects of our own investigation. We always feel self-complacency in our success. In the scriptures, above every thing else, each new enquiry brings some new advantage; for it brings some new proof of the power, wisdom, or goodness of the Deity; and consequently some additional reason for our veneration, or some additional confirmation of our faith. And the truths discovered by our own industry and sagacity, produce not only the greatest satisfaction to the mind, but generally the strongest conviction. The language of revelation itself is, *seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you.*

No wonder, then, all should not with equal clearness discover, what yet all are bound to investigate; and what each must in some degree interpret for himself, no wonder all should not interpret alike. No wonder that accordingly as men possess different degrees of ability, diligence, or candour, they should receive different impressions from the perusal of the same scriptures; that they should draw a variety of doctrines from the same general source; and even erect innumerable errors in opinion on the same basis of infallible truth.

5. This variety of opinions and tenets in religion will be the greater too; because by no religion with which we are acquainted, is such variety precluded. Christianity itself does not profess to establish indisputable certainty, either for its general basis, or for its particular doctrines: but for the one, belief upon testimony, and for the other, tenets formed upon the interpretation of its records. With respect to the former, it was not intended to be irresistible. Our Saviour did not *come down from the cross* that the Jews might *believe him*: and *after his resurrection*

he shewed himself openly, not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before of God. We cannot wonder, therefore, that this testimony has not uniformly confined and fixed opinions; or that its sufficiency has been frequently and boldly, however unreasonably, called in question.

With respect to the doctrines of Christianity, it were not difficult to shew, from the abstruse nature of many amongst them, on one hand, and from the weakness and limitation of human faculties, on the other, that on several important points demonstration and certainty were not possible; and that all the proof has been given which the case could admit. But not to entangle ourselves in metaphysical subtleties, it is clear in point of fact, that the truths of our religion are not discovered by intuition, nor ascertained by scientific demonstration; that they come to us supported only by evidence and argument; that they are not the objects of knowledge, but of faith. The degrees of conviction produced will therefore naturally be different in different men; and almost every separate article of the creed will find its enemies and its

its advocates. It is still the privilege and the duty of reason, in the first place, to determine whether this religion is supported by satisfactory testimony; and consequently whether it is to be received or rejected; and in the second place, to judge whether its doctrines have been justly interpreted, and in what manner its precepts are to be applied in practice. And this power of deciding for ourselves, this freedom of choice and action, we presume, has been left us by our Creator; because it was indispensibly necessary to render just and equitable that responsibility for our conduct, which our religion has announced.

The liberty of the human will I always assume as admitted; because if it be denied, all moral and religious disquisition immediately becomes nugatory and vain. If man be a mere machine, actuated by some superior power; if all his thoughts and actions be the effect of a fixed and original necessity, or of a series of causes, over which he has no influence; guilt and innocence, obedience and transgression can be but empty names,

names; and all that is left us is fullen submission to irresistable fatality.

6. This variety of opinions and tenets in religion has been encreased again, by the attempts which men have made to explain what has not been explained by revelation. In prescribing the general rules of morality, and in teaching the principal articles of faith, our scriptures are sufficiently clear and explicit: but they speak the language of authority, not of critical disquisition; their design is to engage obedience, not to gratify curiosity. Their precepts are intended to form the fundamental principles of our conduct; but the application of these in the detail of practice is left to our own judgment and discretion. In them the obligations to our duty are founded, not upon the fitness of things, the beauty of virtue, nor any other disputable basis of philosophy and speculation, but on the simple and decisive principle of the will of God. They assert the power, the providence, and goodness of the Creator; but do not enter into any metaphysical discussion of his essence, his attributes, or his operations. In these points, however,

men have endeavoured to become wise *above what is written*; to speak with minuteness and precision, where the scriptures have either employed very general terms, or been totally silent. These explanations, it will easily be supposed, have been very different, and every man attached to his own. Various questions have therefore been agitated, not only on the true interpretation of every mysterious doctrine of our religion; but whether each such doctrine could be an essential article of faith; and how far it may be our duty to believe what we cannot comprehend. Controversies on points like these, indeed, have hitherto divided the Christian world, and, except where the religion itself shall produce in its followers wisdom and virtue sufficient to suppress them, probably will divide it to the end of time.

7. Another source of this variety of opinions in religion is, a certain degree of obscurity and ambiguity, unavoidable in all use of language, and therefore to be expected in the language of a divine revelation. We can, indeed, suppose it possible for the Almighty to have revealed his will in terms
essentially

essentially superior to all others, in a language so explicit and perspicuous as to have been exempt from all difficulty and uncertainty. But this is a supposition without proof; and probability is against it. As men are to receive this revelation, the terms in which its sublimest truths are conveyed must be in some measure adapted to the narrowness of human capacities: and as men are to interpret it for themselves, or for each other, and to apply it to the regulation of their sentiments and conduct, it will naturally feel the usual effects of their infirmities and passions; the language of the books of revelation, in common with every other, will be often misunderstood and misapplied.

It is not possible to prove, as has been justly observed, that in language the most familiar to us, any given number of interpreters annex precisely the same idea to the same simple term. How differently then may different men be reasonably expected to understand the general and comprehensive principles of morality, or the mysterious doctrines of theology contained in the Christian revelation! In the scriptures likewise,

the attributes and operations of the Deity, spirit and spiritual ideas, however novel to mankind as articles of faith at their first publication, must have been expressed in terms already known; like all other ideas too, in terms borrowed from material and sensible objects, and therefore by figure and analogy. The truths and precepts of our religion are conveyed to us in the language of a distant age and country; and consequently, by translations only can they be known to the great majority of mankind. They are expressed in terms alluding to the customs and manners of the times, to peculiar modes of thinking and acting, now known by little else than these allusions themselves. They are to be collected from a variety of treatises, historical, prophetic, moral, and religious, written by different authors at very distant periods of time. We receive them mixed with the annals of a people, whose civil and religious establishment was different from every other known in the world; and whose history indeed is not so much an elaborate detail of political and military operations, for the amusement of leisure and curiosity; as a concise nar-
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rative of important events, to display the wisdom, the power, and the mercies of Providence. No wonder then, surely, that so many theological controversies have begun, or ended, in mere disputes about the meaning of words. No wonder, under these circumstances, that the upright, the pious, and even the learned, should sometimes have been led by mistaken interpretations of scripture, to hold mistaken doctrines; and still less, that the superstitious, the ignorant, and the presumptuous, should have supported tenets, which the infidel may think himself entitled to ridicule, and the believer esteem it his duty to refute.

8. Controversies in religion have often been occasioned by the wish, which almost every man feels, to propagate his own opinions. He wishes this in the first instance, perhaps, merely from the social principles of his nature, without any further view than the satisfaction it immediately produces. But if he be seriously convinced that his own tenets are most agreeable to scripture, and therefore most conducive to salvation, he may not only innocently, but laudably, en-

deavour to teach others, what he conceives to be so much for their advantage. He will, however, find continual opposition. Hardly any man willingly admits he has been mistaken; and least of all perhaps on the subject of religion. The doctrines he has long professed are not only familiarized by custom; but are thought to be sanctioned by his conscience, and stamped with the authority of Heaven: and he defends them with the greater obstinacy, because confutation would disturb his peace of mind, and, by alarming him for the soundness of his faith, impair his hopes of acceptance and salvation.

A desire not less ardent, to propagate their peculiar doctrines, has influenced also whole sects and societies of Christians. They have thought it meritorious, and therefore prescribed it as a duty to their adherents, constantly to endeavour to make proselytes to their own creed, to add to the numbers of their own church. And thus have the respective tenets of different individuals, or different sects, been recommended on one side by every argument which zeal and ingenuity

nity could supply, and opposed on the other, with equal diligence and skill, by those who could not approve, or would not adopt them.

9. It has been the policy of almost all governments to secure, as far as possible, uniformity in the religion of the people. Each, therefore, has ordained its respective system of doctrine and discipline, its articles of faith and ceremonies of worship, and with its civil institutions united a religious establishment. This again has been a source of discord and controversy.

Various are the reasons by which a man may be induced to censure, or to oppose, the religious establishment of his country. He may object to it, either because he may be sincerely convinced that there are errors in its doctrines, and abuses in its administration; or because, in real or pretended zeal for freedom, he may condemn all restraint upon publishing religious opinions, and maintain that every man ought to be at liberty to worship God, and to persuade others to worship him, in whatever way his judgment

most approves : he may become its enemy, because his enemies preside in and support it ; or because he loves opposition for its own sake, at least to whatever he did not himself appoint, or does not administer ; because he has been disappointed of the honours or emoluments in it, which he fancies are due to his talents or his virtues ; or, under the pretence of conscientious scruples, he may aim his hostilities against the civil, as well as the ecclesiastical, establishment of the state, in the hope of overturning both, and rising upon their ruins to power and distinction. The advocates for the establishment, on the contrary, will defend it ; they will vindicate its tenets, and assert its purity, or palliate its imperfections. The legislature itself, too, well interposes its authority to restrain such dissentions, or suppress such doctrines, as threaten the tranquillity or safety of the state. Governments, indeed, have not always confined themselves in this point within the limits, which wisdom and justice would have prescribed. A sovereign has sometimes made the interests of religion the pretext to cover the designs of ambition ; and sometimes endeavoured to suppress offensive

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fenfive doctrines by perfecution and penalties, or to propagate favourite tenets by power and compulfion.

It is not intended by thefe obfervations in any degree to determine, to what extent the interference of the civil power, in points of faith and worfhip, is injudicious or wife, juft or unjuft, neceffary or oppreffive. It is not intended to vindicate, or to condemn, either thofe who fupport eftablifhments, or thofe who oppofe them. The prefent purpofe is merely to ftate a fact, which will hardly be controverted; that the effect of forming and enforcing the doctrines of fuch eftablifhments has too often been, not to fpread conviction, but to provoke oppofition; not to enfore unanimity and peace, but to excite difcontent, remonftrance, and diffenfion.

10. Oppofition to the doctrines of a religious eftablifhment has fometimes been fucceffful; and the rejection of received opinions always opens a wide field for the introduction of novelty and variety. When men feel themfelves freed from the authority of
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their former faith, and are not yet duly influenced by any other; when they are relinquishing an old system, and do not yet perhaps thoroughly understand that which is to be substituted in its place; while the boldness still lasts, which led them to reject established doctrines, and their new principles are not yet fully confirmed; in this interval the minds of men are open to every impression, and liable to be swayed towards almost any point. The artful, the ambitious, and the fanatical, therefore, avail themselves of the unsettled state of opinions to publish and disseminate their notions and their theories, however absurd, extravagant, or pernicious. Of these, many from their folly and insignificance will soon be neglected and forgotten: but others, from the singularity of the tenets advanced, or the number of their adherents; from the ingenuity with which they are maintained, or their adaptation to the prevailing passions of the day, will rise into notice and importance, and produce durable effects; will give occasion to lasting controversies, sects, and factions.

From the same tendencies of the human mind, it is observable, that similar circumstances occur with respect to political opinions at every political revolution: and theories of civil government are produced not much less numerous, various, or extravagant, than the theories of religion. The transactions now passing in a neighbouring country may be adduced as an example of the latter; and the former is abundantly illustrated by the events and controversies, which attended or succeeded the separation of so many of the states of Europe from the church of Rome.

11. Amongst the causes of difference of opinion and controversy in religion, must not be omitted a passion, which though it seems to be weak and puerile, is in reality one of the strongest motives of human action; which every man professes to despise, and almost every man labours to gratify: what I mean is vanity, the affectation of extraordinary talents and sagacity. Every man loves distinction and pre-eminence; and never more so, than when they are founded on superiority of understanding. To obtain, there-

therefore, the reputation of such superiority becomes a very general ambition. But where one man honourably exerts himself, to deserve this reputation, a thousand perhaps, in order to obtain it, descend to the meanness of artifice or deception. A few nobly aim at the first rank in the fair field of truth; but a far greater number pursue it through the crooked paths of singularity and paradox. Yet they do not seem, more frequently to mislead others, than to deceive themselves. They labour to maintain fanciful theories, till their own arguments produce conviction in their own minds; they embellish error, till they embrace it as truth.

The professors of religion, in common with the rest of mankind, have felt the influence of vanity. From this motive alone, inadequate as it should seem to others, and unknown, as it often is, to him whom it actuates, have many been induced to reject a received opinion, or to oppose the doctrines of an established church; while others have been stimulated by the same motive to defend and support them. Some have endeavoured,

on one hand, to become the founders of new sects, and *to call them after their own names*; and if they could not seduce the powerful or the wise, to have at least the populace in their train: while others, on the contrary, have obstinately refused to relinquish tenets, even when no longer able rationally to defend them; and both have contended for victory more than truth, not for religion, but for fame. *These are they which receive honour one of another, but seek not the honour that cometh from God.*

12. Another source of difference of opinion in religion, or at least of controversy and its continuance, is prejudice. Almost every man entertains a partiality for certain opinions and doctrines in preference to all others; for those which education instilled, and custom has confirmed; for those which he sees generally professed; for those which are adapted to his natural temper and disposition; or for those which are maintained by men, to whose judgment or authority he has been accustomed to submit; for those, in short, which have once, by whatever means, or from whatever cause, obtained firm possession

feſſion of his mind. Man is, to a greater degree than ſuperficial obſervers will eaſily believe, the creature of habit; and habit is the parent of prejudice. From the conſtitution of human nature, or from its weakneſs and depravity, it is found neceſſary to prepare men, by education and cuſtom, for the ſtations they are deſtined to fill, pre-viously and early to impreſs their minds with the requiſite opinions and principles, and to eſtabliſh, as far as poſſible, appropriate habits of thought and action. Againſt theſe prepoſſeſſions, indeed, declamation has been confident and plauſible, and againſt their exceſſes and abuſes, reaſonable and juſt. But on the contrary, it is to theſe we are indebted for much of the ſtability and conſiſtency of the human character, and for the greater part of our contentment and ſatiſfaction in our reſpective ſtations; for many of the beſt ſentiments of our hearts, and for not a few of the beſt virtues of our conduct. Take away all that ariſes from cuſtom and prepoſſeſſion, and how little will remain of patriotiſm, of friendſhip, or even of natural affection. To theſe prejudices, however, whether reaſonable or exceſſive, whether

ther good or evil, the majority of mankind owe the greater part of their opinions; and these opinions are generally cherished with peculiar fondness, and guarded with peculiar jealousy. We consider them not as being themselves questionable in point of truth; but rather as a standard by which other truths are to be tried. We continue to hold them, because we have begun; we persist in defending them, because we have defended them before. In religion each maintains the truth of his own tenets, the superiority of his own church; and that often with a zeal, which provokes the opposition it labours to silence, and with such obstinacy, as prevents the conviction it professes to seek.

13. Amongst the causes of this variety of opinions and tenets in religion must be reckoned the very frequent, though very mischievous, weaknesses of superstition and enthusiasm. Of superstition the natural tendency seems to be, to produce in its followers silence and submission. But by the absurdity of its tenets, and its obstinacy in adhering to them, it has provoked so much opposition or ridicule, as to have been frequently the cause
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of dispute and disturbance. It has overwhelmed the mind with groundless dejection and terror, and then mistaken the suggestions of its own fears for the dictates of conscience. It has represented all doubt on religious subjects as dangerous, and all enquiry as presumptuous. It has interpreted literally expressions that are figurative and allegorical; and considered precepts as perpetually and universally binding, that were intended only as temporary and local regulations. It has lifted external ceremonies into such importance, as to place them at least on a level with moral duties; and on these, and a thousand other errors, has founded such wild and extravagant doctrines, as no sound understanding can admit, and such supernumerary and burthenfome duties, as hardly any man can fulfil.

Different and even opposite to these, in their nature and tendency, are the errors of enthusiasm. The diffidence and fears of superstition are now exchanged for familiarity and presumption; and the illusions of a heated imagination are mistaken for the irradiations of truth. Enthusiasm does not

shrink with the apprehensions of rejection and reprobation; but advances boldly in the confidence of election and grace. It does not so much fear to fail in practical virtue; as deem it an inferior and secondary point of duty. It rejects enquiry; because truth is to be felt, rather than sought; and despises learning, in the hope of illumination from above. Both, however, have found followers among the weak and the illiterate; and both have given rise to sects and heresies; if not formidable by the rank or talents of their adherents, often troublesome by their numbers and their zeal.

14. The last cause I shall mention of the variety of opinions in religion, and perhaps the most frequent cause of objection to it, is a vicious disposition. *Every one, that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reprov'd.* The wicked man can enjoy the fruits of fraud, the gratifications of pride, and the pleasures of licentiousness, only by silencing his conscience; and his conscience can be effectually silenced only by getting rid of his faith, or of all attention to its suggestions.

It is by no means intended to insinuate that all, who object to the truth of Christianity, are prompted to urge their objections by their irreligious principles; that the errors of their understandings proceed from the corruption of their hearts. But as it will not be questioned, that unbelief has too often been wholly or partially occasioned by inclination and passion; it cannot be unreasonable or uncandid to assign a vicious disposition, as one source of want of conviction in religion; as one cause, amongst many, of doubt, dejection, and infidelity.

Bad men, however, are by no means always infidels upon enquiry and conviction. They seldom examine deeply the foundations of religion. Their minds seize upon some popular and superficial objection; and their own propensities and passions give it weight and effect. One fixes upon some circumstance in the appearance or the operations of nature, which he conceives to contradict, and therefore to overthrow, the narrative in his bible; or upon some mysterious doctrine of revelation, which he cannot explain; and which he therefore concludes to be neither
necessary

necessary nor possible to be believed. Another has discovered that there have been many fabulous religions in the world, and easily persuades himself that Christianity does but add one fable more to the number; or when he sees it sometimes perverted, and often disobeyed, hastily infers that its followers do not in reality believe, what they find it their interest to profess. A third, because the truth of Christianity does not strike his own mind, or the minds of others, with resistless conviction, cannot consider it as a divine revelation; or because his own experience has shewn him nothing miraculous, will not believe that miracles ever were performed.

Objections, like these, are too acceptable to a mind that wishes to find them true, to be examined with due care or candour. The vicious man flies from argument to his pleasures; and labours less, perhaps without being sensible of it, to discover truth, than to avoid reflection. Thus is imposed upon the advocates of religion and virtue, a task at once difficult and necessary, irksome and almost hopeless; to give new attractions to

arguments which have lost their novelty; to refute the same objections by the same answers; to preach to those, who are not disposed to hear; to convince men the most unwilling to be convinced.

Such appear to be the general and principal causes of that want of unanimity respecting the Christian religion; of the numerous controversies it has produced; and of those various objections to its divine original; which its friends always lament, and in which its enemies often triumph. It is not to be supposed, however, that these causes have operated each singly upon some single mind; that every instance of doubt or infidelity has been founded upon one ground of objection alone. Sometimes, indeed, each may have produced its effect by its distinct and separate influence; but they have more frequently given force and support one to another; and in different minds have probably been mixed and united in every possible mode of combination.

But if these, and such as these, be the true and the only causes of our differences and dissentions; the justest inferences from them

them

them will be, not to the prejudice of a divine revelation, but powerfully in its favour. As far as objections to our religion have arisen from such causes as have been mentioned, the weight of these objections must be materially diminished by the very statement of the case; by accounting fairly for their existence, without admitting their validity. If difficulties were unavoidable from the very nature of a divine revelation and the nature of man; let not Christianity be rejected, because it has neither violated the intellectual and moral constitution of its professors, nor effected what was impossible while that constitution remained. If the variety of religious sects and tenets amongst us proceed wholly from our own weaknesses and passions; let them not be urged as objections to the revelation itself, or as an imputation to the wisdom or benevolence of its author. If Christianity could not be more effectually, while rationally enforced; if irresistible conviction could not be impressed upon our minds, without interfering with our freedom of will and action; it is surely no argument against it, that some have abused their freedom, and rejected its doctrines, or transgressed its laws.

If there have appeared reason to believe, that a large proportion of mankind are guided in their actions more frequently by the impulse of the moment, than by the decision of their understandings; that even their opinions are as often the result of their situation and circumstances, as of deliberation and conviction; and that their conduct is influenced by petty interests and vicious passions, more than by fixed and rational principles of duty; it will not surely be fair to conclude that the Christian revelation is not credible, because it has not been universally believed; or that its testimony is insufficient, because it has not always produced faith, or faith been followed by obedience.

But whatever be the true causes, or the fair inferences from them, the same causes will probably always operate, differences of opinion will always exist, and objections continue to be urged. Of institutions, like the present, we are therefore furnished at once with the principle, and with the vindication. They are equally benevolent and judicious. They contribute to supply a constant antidote to poison constantly administered.

nistered. One reason why Providence permits ignorance and vice in the world probably is, to prove and exercise the faith and virtues of the wise and good; and scepticism and infidelity in particular render it necessary for us to remove the doubts of the one, and to refute the objections of the other. The man of opulence, therefore, may honourably exert his liberality in providing instruction, and the learned believer his piety and talents in communicating it, in order to clear the difficulties in his religion, and to diffuse more widely its truth and blessings. As long as the adversaries of Christianity continue their attacks, so long will it be duty and merit in its advocates to repel them; and each will take the station, which he conceives to be most in danger, or which he thinks himself best able to defend.

The two principal and most popular sources of objection to the Christian revelation at present seem to be; that it was not necessary; and that it is not credible; that the light of nature and reason was sufficient to direct mankind in their pursuit of virtue and happiness, without other assistance; and

that if other assistance was necessary, this supposed revelation is clogged with so many difficulties, that it cannot reasonably be believed and adopted, as furnishing the assistance required.

To the former of these points, answers of great learning and ability have been repeatedly offered; such, indeed, as might have been expected to supersede all further discussion of the subject. But the objection still claims our notice; for it is still urged against us. In these times, indeed, it is insisted on with as much confidence, as if from its novelty no answer had yet been given; and with as much triumph, as if from its force it could not be answered. The beaten track, therefore, must be again traced. In addition to the answers already produced, one more shall be attempted.

With respect to the objections drawn from the second source; that all should be noticed in the present lectures, is not practicable, and will not be expected. It is intended to select a few such as seem to have an effect upon men in our own times; such as occur
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in the conversation or the writings of the present day; and to attempt a reply to them, in a way so far popular and familiar, as may be not unacceptable to those who are either not professionally engaged in theological studies, or not deeply skilled in the questions that are agitated respecting the doctrines or the establishment of our national church. That any new arguments will be produced, it were presumption to pretend; nor can it be expected they should easily be found. The Christian religion is limited to the truths contained in its own records. To these no addition or diminution can be allowed. The arguments too, by which it is supported, are coeval with the religion itself: and from its nature and importance it has engaged the attention of the wisest and best men in every age since its promulgation to the world. All the objections, and all the difficulties, which the subject can admit, have probably long since been urged; and consequently all have been repeatedly examined and discussed. Some difficulties are capable only of one adequate solution; and of the various answers applicable to others, the best, no doubt, have already been employed. A few illustrious

trious individuals, by the exertion of superior powers of mind, or by the judicious or fortunate direction of their studies, have occasionally thrown an additional ray of light on the evidence or the doctrines of our faith. But all its other advocates must be content with the humbler task of producing the stores already provided; and adapting them to the occasions by which they appear to be required. The novelty, however, which it is thus difficult to find, we conceive not to be necessary to the cause in which we are engaged. It cannot reasonably be demanded from us, till either new difficulties shall be brought forward, or the modes of reasoning already employed shall appear insufficient to convince the sincere and candid enquirer. With the same arms, with which we have so often triumphed, we may still hope to conquer. But our adversaries have lately endeavoured to adapt the style and form of their objections to the taste and capacity of the most ordinary readers; to give their artillery such a direction and level, as may be likely to do the most extensive mischief: and we must prepare to meet them on their own ground. The champion of Christianity
must

must regulate his defence by the nature of the attack. It seems neither useless nor unnecessary in these times, to reduce the substance of more learned disquisitions into more familiar forms, and to compress them into a narrower compass; to collect from every quarter, such arguments as appear the most apposite and decisive; and to present them recommended, if not by eloquence and erudition, at least by modesty and candour; if not by their depth or novelty, at least by their conciseness and perspicuity. If the present preacher can produce that which the learned and the judicious may hear without disgust, and by which the young, the gay, or the uninformed may be persuaded to think and to enquire, he shall consider his time and attention as having been well employed; and the task as fulfilled, which he undertakes to perform. To support the cause of religion and virtue very different methods may be pursued; and the most promising will not always prove the most effectual. By the interposition of heaven, Christianity was at first propagated by means and instruments apparently very inadequate to their object; and at this day the
highest

highest or humblest abilities, the weakest or the most powerful effort, must depend for its efficacy and success on the favour and blessing of heaven. *Paul planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.*

SERMON II.

ON THE NECESSITY OF A DIVINE REVELATION, FOR THE INSTRUCTION OF MANKIND IN RELIGION AND MORALITY.

I COR. I. 21.

The world by wisdom knew not God.

THE first and broadest ground of objection, to what we receive as a divine revelation, has generally been, that it is not necessary; that mankind do not stand in need of such preternatural instruction and assistance, as it professes to communicate. The Creator, say the adversaries of revealed religion, has given to man the faculty of reason; and by the native powers, or by the due improvement, of this faculty, he is enabled to attain all the information, that is necessary to his enjoyments or his virtue.

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He is enabled, they maintain, not only to ascertain the rules and principles of good morals ; but to urge sufficient arguments and motives to enforce the practice : to collect satisfactory evidence, not only that he is at present in a state of probation and responsibility ; but that he is destined for a future and more permanent existence ; in which he must receive the just recompence of his merits or his crimes. He is enabled to discover, they assert, not only the existence of a Supreme Being ; but his attributes and perfections ; not only that he has been the author *and giver of life* ; but that he will hereafter be the judge of our conduct ; or in the language of revelation itself ; *that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.* From these premises they conclude it to be improbable and incredible, that the Almighty should give, what was not wanted ; that he should, without use or necessity, contrive and conduct the extensive and complicated work of the redemption of mankind by the gospel ; and that it is much more probable, this supposed revelation is the invention of human policy ; either the pious fraud of the benevolent, to allure men
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into peaceable subjection to the laws of social order; or the artifice of the ambitious, to keep the timid and the weak in subjection to the cunning and the bold.

If unassisted reason were really able to discover, all that is here ascribed to it, the necessity of a divine revelation, as far at least as it is a system of moral instruction, would certainly be superseded. But if according to the observation of Cicero, to say that no man has been wise, and that no man can be wise, amount to the same thing; if it be fair to assume, that men are not able to do, what in fact they have never done; then will it not be difficult to shew, that reason cannot effect what the objection supposes; that it is not a sufficient guide, or sufficient authority, in our pursuit of truth, virtue, and happiness.

1. The light of reason is not sufficient in each individual*. It is not impressed upon

* Lord Herbert, Tindal, and other advocates of natural religion, in opposition to revelation, maintain that God has implanted in the mind of every man the true principles of religion and morality.

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the minds of infants; for it does not appear in them; nor is it able to direct them, so early as direction is required. The child, for the most obvious reasons, is long guided by the authority of his parents and preceptors; before he can be trusted to be master of his own conduct. The youth and the man are frequently called upon to act, before they have fully settled their principles of action; to perform their part in many important scenes of life, before they are qualified to reason largely or skilfully; before they are able to judge between opposite motives; to surmount the difficulties of complicated cases; and to decide with wisdom and justice. Nor does this light and intelligence appear to burst at once upon the mind, at any subsequent period of life; for all the improvement our faculties receive is obviously gradual and progressive. The knowledge and principles of our duty, then, are not originally impressed upon the mind; but instilled by education and instruction; they are not discovered by intuition, or infused in a moment; but acquired by time and study; they are not the endowment of nature; but the result of observation and experience.

Whence

Whence this information is really and originally derived, shall hereafter be enquired. Admitting at present that men may obtain it, by the due improvement of their faculties, by education and instruction, by observation and experience; how shall we expect to find it in those, who are in a great measure destitute of these advantages. By far the greater part of mankind are obliged to employ their whole time and attention, to procure the necessaries of life. To this object their education and instruction have been confined; and their observation and experience seldom extend much beyond it. From the hour they have strength to wield the implements of husbandry or manufacture, they are compelled to daily labour, to earn their daily bread. In them, therefore, reason is not only little cultivated and improved; but becomes in a great degree incapable of cultivation; by long disuse, by the labour of the body, and the various hardships of their situation. And if it be not able to direct them, without such improvement and assistance, as it is impossible for them by their own efforts to obtain; it is fair to conclude, that the light of nature is not sufficient in

each individual to teach the principles, and to enforce the practice, of good morals; much less to give them, what is indispensibly necessary to the former, rational notions of a Supreme Being and his providence, of their dependence and responsibility. Such men are under the necessity of doing, what indeed by such men is every where done; of taking their rules of faith and morals, of principles and conduct, in a great measure upon trust from those, whose judgment and instruction they esteem, or to whose authority they find it convenient to submit.

This consideration will appear of still greater weight if we reflect, that the rules of morality, when first announced, are not all self-evident and indisputable: many of them require examination and proof, before they bring conviction. They are maintained by different men on different grounds; and various reasons are assigned for the rules themselves; and still more various, for their authority and obligation.

It seems fair to assume too, that if the light of reason were sufficient, in each individual,

vidual, to discover right principles of faith and action, each individual must certainly discover them. Otherwise, the Creator must have bestowed a faculty, for a purpose which it does not answer; and the endowment is a mockery. That each individual, however, does not discover them, is too obvious in point of fact, to require argument or evidence. Nor will any supposed neglect or abuse of our reason satisfactorily account for so extraordinary a failure; or, upon the hypothesis of the objector, vindicate the wisdom and justice of the Creator. No time can be specified when it was successful; no such instances can be produced, as will warrant any general conclusion in favour of its sufficiency: no individual can be named, who adopted and fixed his opinions, by the exertions of his own reason alone; who, without instruction or assistance, formed for himself a system of religion and morality.

Another argument, against this sufficiency of reason in each individual, may be drawn from the general uniformity in natural endowments. Our senses, our passions, and our instincts, in themselves, and in their

operations and effects, unless where they are occasionally controuled by some superior influence, are regular and universal. They may differ in degree, but not in kind. Had this supposed light of reason then resembled other natural endowments; it must have resembled them also in the regularity of its effects. And as truth and right, the greatest and the best objects of its research, are always the same; every man must have discovered the same articles of faith, and the same principles of conduct. The rules of morality would have been every where alike; and the doctrines of religion uniform and consistent. But how far this is from being the case, the most superficial inspection of history will inform us. Not two nations upon earth, whose sentiments are known to us, however simple in their opinions and manners, precisely agree in their religious doctrines, or rules of practice. Not a civilized people can be found, with whose history we are acquainted, who have not at some time or other changed, in important articles, their system of faith, and in some points, their precepts of morality. Nor can a nation be pointed out, that is not disturbed

by sects, heresies, and factions*. In the populace this might not be allowed to have much weight in point of argument; because they may have been led astray, by the influence of a celebrated name, by the policy of power, or the authority of conquest. It still, however, proves the want of unanimity amongst mankind; and the truth is, that amongst the more exalted in rank or

* It will be observed, perhaps, that similar changes have taken place in nations professing to believe the Christian revelation. And if we admit the fact, even in its fullest extent; it will not much affect the argument. But between the conduct of heathen and Christian nations in this point, a remarkable distinction may be observed. The latter have differed in opinion, or changed their opinions, not upon what constituted the standard of truth and duty, but only upon the interpretation of it; while the former have disagreed or varied in their sentiments about the standard itself. It is, indeed, one of the obvious advantages of Christianity, that its doctrines and precepts are preserved in a fixed and authoritative record; to which appeals may always be made; either to prevent difference of opinion; or to determine such controversies as happen to have arisen; and though from the nature of the subject, and the errors and infirmities of mankind, disputes will probably always exist; they will be less frequent, and on points of much less importance, than if we had either no fixed standard; or none but such as reason and human authority could have established.

talents not much more uniformity will be found. Not a philosopher can be named, who was in all points of religion and morality decided in his opinions; or at all times even consistent with himself; and how little they agreed with each other, their numerous sects and endless disputations will abundantly inform us. The academic ridiculed the stoic; the epicurean derided both; and the sect of the sceptics is said to have taken its rise from the dissentions of the rest. The light of nature then has not enabled each individual to discover any rule of conduct that is, what such a rule evidently ought to be, clear and uniform, consistent and universal.

2. If then the light of nature and reason was not sufficient in each individual, to teach right principles, and to enforce good morals; the next possible supposition is, that it was given in the requisite proportion to a certain number, for the instruction of the rest; that a few were peculiarly endowed, for the benefit of the whole. But before this supposition can be admitted, it will be incumbent upon its advocates, if in reality any such be found, to point out the individuals they

they mean; who they are, whose instructions it will be our advantage to receive, and our duty to obey. It is true that individuals, possessing talents greatly superior to those granted to mankind in general, have appeared at different periods, and in different nations, of the world. It is true, that they have made such discoveries or improvements in art and science, as might justly entitle them to be considered, as men sent by heaven to be a benefit and a blessing to their fellow-creatures. It is true, that many of them have, by their abilities and their industry, obtained high distinction and authority in life, and been honoured, and even deified, after death. But it is not true, that any individuals have appeared, possessing an indisputable claim to be considered, as the instructors of the human race in morality and religion. None have appeared with knowledge in these important points, so evidently superior to that of all others, that the rest of mankind would voluntarily acquiesce in their opinions and decisions. None have appeared, who could teach what was requisite to be known, and support what

they taught by such argument and evidence, as it was impossible to refute. None in short have appeared, who could communicate such a system of morals, and still less, such a system of religion, as could either claim the general approbation, or engage the general obedience, of their fellow-creatures. All who have written since the publication of the gospel are here out of the question. By the illustrious characters of earlier times the point must be decided. For the Christian revelation is that very instruction and assistance, for the necessity of which, to them and to ourselves, we are to contend.

Nor must it be forgotten, that the honours we pay to the sages of antiquity, and indeed the honours they best deserve, are not so much absolute as relative; not so much for the discoveries they actually made, as for their discoveries compared with their means of making them; not simply for the information they acquired and communicated; but for having acquired and communicated so much, when they had received so little; when the full discovery of the word and will
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of God had not yet been vouchsafed to mankind. We have indeed a prepossession of gratitude in their favour. From the study of their writings we have received much of the best improvement of our minds; they were formerly the instructors of our youth; and they now constitute the amusement of our age. But the taste of the critic, the eloquence of the orator, or the beauties of the poet, are not now to be examined. We are at present to consider them merely as instructors in religion and morality; and their excellence in other respects must not blind our judgments to their defects in these. Whatever esteem we may entertain for Socrates; a still greater esteem is due to truth. We are not to err with Plato; but to hold fast *the form of sound words* in the gospel of Christ.

Admitting, however, a few illustrious individuals to have learned, from whatever source, the true principles of morality, and even sufficient knowledge of religion to enforce them; it will still remain to be shewn, by what marks these men could be with certainty

tainty distinguished as public instructors ; by what characteristics, internal or external, they could prove the authenticity of their doctrines ; and by what motives and authority engage others to hear and to obey them. If their instructions were recommended only by their superior wisdom ; and if their precepts were enforced only by their own utility ; none would be convinced of their value, but such as were able to judge of it ; those who most wanted, would not regard them. As to any external characteristics, the fact need not be disproved ; for it cannot be supported, by any plausible argument or evidence. They did not quote any prophecies fulfilled in their persons and conduct : they did not appeal to any miracles, which the power, who sent them, had enabled them to perform. We know that Numa professed to be assisted in the formation of his laws by a nymph of the forest ; Lycurgus, by the oracle of Apollo ; and Minos, by Jupiter himself. But these were evidently convenient fictions ; designed to give the authors weight and authority with the illiterate and superstitious populace ; who were neither very able nor
much

much disposed, to question, or to examine, the truth of their pretensions. Had they been furnished with real and substantial evidence of a divine commission; it ought and it would have been brought forward to public view. It would not have consisted solely of the assertion of those, who were under the strongest temptations to a fraud; because most to be benefited by its success: but it would have appeared in a form adapted to the capacities of those, whom it was intended to convince. It would not have borne, as it now does, every mark of pretence and imposture; but the plain and genuine features of authenticity and truth. It is worth while to observe too, that the artifice, to which Numa, Lycurgus, and Minos had recourse, is no mean evidence; both that they had heard of divine communications to men; and that some such revelation, as we contend for, was in their opinion necessary, to secure the virtue of individuals and the peace of society. But whatever may be thought of the expedients, or the opinions, of the ancient legislators and moralists; if Providence has not given, to any public instructors among the heathens, indisputable marks
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of their office, or indisputable proofs of their authority; we must inevitably conclude, that no such instructors have been sent; none, whom mankind are bound to receive and to obey.

3. If then it be true, that the light of nature is neither sufficient of itself in each individual, to teach and regulate our faith and practice; nor that a few have been peculiarly endowed and commissioned for the benefit of the whole; the only supposition remaining, to support the sufficiency of reason, is, that the requisite information is attainable, by the united and successive exertions of mankind. But if it was not so attained before the publication of the gospel; we may be allowed to conclude that it was not attainable at all: and that it was not so attained, will appear from the slightest examination of the faith and ethics of the heathens.

Their religion was universally idolatry: and the whole multitude of their deities were supposed to be *of like passions with themselves*; whose caprices, cruelties, and lusts constituted

tuted the articles of their faith, and the subjects of their devotions. These deities were worshipped, not only under various forms of the beasts of the field and the fowls of the air, but of a thousand different images of wood and stone, *the work of men's hands*; and the infatuated populace often mistook the representation for the original; and addressed, not a sublime and invisible divinity, but the brute, the reptile, or the statue, as the ultimate object of their adoration. Nor were the established forms of their devotion, as will easily be supposed, more pure or dignified than their creed. They were indeed either such rites and ceremonies, as were devoid of all rational use and meaning; or such as could not be practised, and cannot be stated, without offence to decency, and to good morals. Their system of faith was therefore injurious to the dignity and honour of the Supreme Being; and their worship such as must have been, not only offensive to the proper object of worship, but prejudicial to that morality, which it ought to have purified and improved. On the licentious character and tendency, however, of the heathen mythology, and on the grossness of their
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their superstition and idolatry, it is not necessary that I should enlarge; for they have been stated and exposed, till the subject will hardly excite attention; till our conviction is almost forgotten in weariness and disgust.

* But it has been maintained in their defence, that such was the creed only of the vulgar and illiterate; that the populace, indeed, from their ignorance and credulity, might believe all the extravagant tenets of their theology; and that the magistrates might support them for the purposes of policy; but that the philosophers not only despised and censured, what we so justly condemn; but knew and maintained the fundamental article of true religion, the unity

* Varro and Plutarch make a triple division of the antient theology; into the fabulous, which belonged to the poets; the popular, which was supported by the laws; and the physical, which belonged to the philosophers: and Gibbon, with some reference to such a division, and with more attention to the epigramatic turn of his sentence, than to its accuracy, has told us; that "the various modes of worship, which prevailed in the Roman world, were all considered by the people as equally true, by the philosopher, as equally false, and by the magistrate, as equally useful." Rom. Emp. Chap. 2.

of the Godhead. This has indeed been repeatedly asserted, but it has not been proved. The philosophers, instead of exposing the popular theology, as void of foundation in truth, and in its tendency prejudicial to good morals, united with their fellow-citizens in the customary rites of devotion; and declared it to be impious and criminal to question the truth, or disturb the solemnities, of the religion of their ancestors. Some sects, indeed, endeavoured to palliate even the poetical mythology; by representing it as mystical, emblematical and allegorical fable; veiling the truths and operations of nature, under the supposed transactions of their deities; and possessing a depth and significancy, which the poets themselves do not appear ever to have had in contemplation; and which the academic in Cicero has successfully ridiculed and exposed. Nor shall we be much disposed to extol this philosophy, when we reflect; that it was either not able, or not inclined, to devise a better system of faith and worship, to be adopted by the people, and enforced by the magistrate. It is indeed much easier to tell what is wrong, than to teach what is right; to expose error,

to discover truth*. They might have pointed out the weakness of particular articles, or demolished the whole fabric, of the popular superstitions; but they were not therefore prepared to erect the luminous edifice of true religion. Socrates, though condemned to an ignominious death, for his supposed contempt of the deities of his country, carefully performed all the rites of the established religion †. Cicero, in his treatise on the nature of the Gods, has not more displayed his eloquence as a writer, than his inability to give satisfactory information on the subject ‡. And
when

* What was said by Baudius of Erasmus respecting his religious opinions, may with great justice be applied to most of the antient philosophers; *Videtur magis habuisse quod fugeret, quàm quod sequeretur*; he seemed rather to have determined what to reject, than what to believe: and Cicero with equal truth and candour declares, “*Utinam tam facile vera invenire possem, quàm falsa convincere;*” I wish I could as easily discover truth, as I can refute error.

† Xenoph. Mem. et Apol. Socr.

‡ Had this celebrated treatise ended with the second book, it might have been more satisfactory to the reader, because the author would have appeared to have satisfied himself. But the third involves us again in inextricable difficulties and perplexity. The treatise does not support
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when the Athenians enquired of the oracle, what religion they should profess; the answer was, the religion of their ancestors *. The people then, the philosophers, and even the Gods themselves, were almost equally ignorant, what system of faith and worship was the truest and the best.

Our usual habits of reasoning lead us to expect, that such as were the tenets of religion amongst the heathens, such would be their precepts for practice; that their morality would be as corrupt as their creed. But this, though unhappily too much the case, is by no means universally true. The principles of virtue are, in their own nature, much less abstruse and difficult than the doctrines of theology; and the sages of antiquity did not perceive that close and in-

the popular religion; but entirely overthrows it. It does not adopt the tenets of any particular sect of philosophers; but states and refutes them all. As far as a tendency to any particular system is discoverable; it is either towards the atheism of Strato; or towards that pantheism, which is at least as antient as the verses ascribed to Orpheus, and since better known as the doctrine of Spinoza. But the whole terminates without conclusion or decision.

* Cicero de Leg. 2. 16.

timate connection between religion and morality; of which better information has enabled us to see the necessity and the advantage. With them the latter did not derive exclusively from the former its principle, its model, and its sanctions. Their system of ethics, however, though much less defective than their tenets of religion, was still at a wide distance from perfection. Many of our moral and social duties, indeed, they have enforced by every argument which genius could invent, and recommended by every ornament which eloquence could bestow. But they were not possessed of any certain and universal principle of good morals—Each has admitted some vice amongst the virtues he prescribes*.

Amidst

* Lactantius and others have observed, that from the writings of the various heathen moralists a system of ethics might be collected, as compleat as that of the gospel itself. Perhaps the fact might be questioned. But allowing it to be true; it is not to be expected that each individual should search from Aristotle to Cicero, and from Plato to Seneca, in order to settle his principles and rules of action: and had each individual leisure and inclination to undertake the task, what is to be his guide in performing it? by what means is he to distinguish what to adopt, and what to reject? This might form the amusement of a man of learning;

ing;

Amidst the fairest flowers of heathen morality, is always found a mixture of weeds or poisons. The principle and the rule of rectitude assumed by Cicero is, what he calls right reason; and this, after some obscure and unavailing disquisition, he determines to be the reason of the Supreme Being. But were this information just; for want of advancing one step further, it is wholly without effect or use. He has not, and he could not inform us, how the reason of the Supreme Being is to be known. With respect to practical morality; *Theodorus permitted theft and sacrilege; and †Aristotle has recommended resentment and revenge. The perfect republic of ‡Plato did not exclude the practice of falsehood; and it ordained the most unwarrantable licentiousness. Even §Epicetus and ||Antoninus themselves al-

ing; but not the instruction of the ignorant. Lactantius himself admits, that he only could accomplish this, who had been previously taught of God. He only could erect, from the materials of Pagan antiquity, the fabric of perfect morality, who possessed already the model in the bible.

* Diog. Laert. Lib. 2. † De Morib. Lib 4, 5.

‡ De Repub. 3 & 5. § Dissert.

|| Ant. Medit. Lib. 3, 5, 10.

lowed their wise man to seek refuge from affliction in suicide.

But admitting they had been perfect in the practical virtues they recommended; there are other points, essential to our duty or our peace, which they have not taught. They have not, for example, accounted on any rational principle for the mixture of good and evil, of vice and virtue in the world; for the occasional prosperity of the wicked, and the affliction of the just. All we can learn from them on this important subject, either has little meaning, or brings little satisfaction. By one sect we are taught, that all sublunary events are under the direction of a blind and capricious chance; by another, that they are regulated by an irresistible fatality; and by a third, that there are two original and opposite powers in nature; a malignant demon, the cause of evil, as well as a benevolent being, the author of good. And for one of the most necessary parts of human duty, patience in adversity and resignation to the divine will, they have recommended little else, than either to seize, with the Epicurean, whatever enjoyment the present

present hour allows; or to acquire, with the Stoic, an unnatural indifference and insensibility.

4. Admitting, however, still farther, that they had been able to teach every part of human duty; by what arguments could they have proved that the doctrines they taught were truth; and that the precepts they delivered, it was incumbent upon us to receive? Allowing even this to be accomplished; by what authority could they have prevailed upon the rest of the world, or by what motives induced them, to practise what was taught? The table of Cebes will shew, that as they could not discover what would constitute our real happiness; they could not urge any adequate and efficacious motives to our duty. They have indeed pursued the enquiry with great diligence; but by no means with as great success.

The native beauty of virtue, and the love of virtue for its own sake, was a language, which they either supposed to contain much meaning and argument; or which they employed, because they had nothing more de-

cifive to urge in the cause. It was, however, a notion much too abstracted for common minds; too shadowy for the basis of duty; and perhaps never influenced the conduct of a single man. It was only the meteor of fancy; not the sunshine of truth. It might amuse the imagination; but could not illuminate the understanding.

As motives somewhat more substantial, though in their estimation of inferior value, they have urged the regard usually and reasonably paid to health, to fortune, and to reputation*. But without entering into a
minute

* The following observations originally made a part of the text; and may, perhaps, still be thought not unworthy of a place in a note. With respect to the first; the injury to health from the practice of vice is not immediate or certain: for many vices may be practised, by which the health is not affected: and even licentious indulgencies are not always followed by disease, nor do they always visibly shorten life. The argument drawn from thence, therefore, in favour of virtue may be opposed as inconclusive. The effects, on which its force depends, are not universal and inevitable. But whatever may be the real force of the argument, it is not likely to secure good morals. We are all too apt not to fear pain, while we do not feel it. And though regard for their health will in a certain degree
always

minute examination of these considerations, it may safely be asserted, that each separately is either too limited to be of general use, or too feeble to be efficacious. The force of each indeed varies, not only with the varieties of climate, government, and public opinion; but with the age and station, sentiments and habits, of almost every individual. And whether they act singly or in conjunction, they are too irregular and uncertain in their influence, to form the principle of good morals;

always influence the prudent and the temperate; it will never be, on one hand, an effectual check to violent and headstrong passions; nor on the other, an effectual incitement to the more laborious and painful duties of life.

With respect to the regard for property, as the principle of morality; it is in its own nature perfectly indifferent; and can become a restraint upon vice, or a motive to virtue, only according to the previous disposition of him by whom fortune is possessed, or by whom it is desired. The ambition to obtain opulence and its advantages, if not under the direction of better principles, may not more frequently stimulate the exertions of honest industry, than the efforts of artifice and fraud. Though the apprehension of injury to his fortune will often restrain a man in moderate circumstances; it can have little weight with him, whose ample stores are equal to the most expensive

morals; and too indefinite in their meaning and estimation to be our guide in practice.

In aid of these motives have been urged, therefore, the institutions of civil policy. The laws of our country, it may be said, ought to form a perfect rule of duty; and the authority of the magistrate enforce the performance. But, not to mention that if reason calls in the aid of human laws she acknowledges, as mere reason, her own insuff-

gratifications. And our own observation and experience may convince us that the possession of wealth, far from being itself the principle of good morals, too often encourages such guilty passions as it furnishes the means to gratify. It depends wholly on the possessor, whether property become the instrument of his virtue, or the minister of his vices.

The care of character and the love of fame have indeed prompted many to exertions the most honourable, and actions the most brilliant: but what good effect can these motives have upon those, who indeed most want such incitements, but are least sensible of their influence, the mean spirited and the depraved! They will always sacrifice what they conceive to be the shadowy advantages of reputation, to the more substantial pleasures of ease, gain, or sensuality,

iciency;

iciency ; these laws themselves may be unjust, or unjustly administered ; and what shall rectify their irregularities, and make us amends for any injuries we may have sustained ? The wisest and the best human institutions cannot always punish crimes, and much less prevent them ; and they seldom attempt to reward virtue ; but as they happen to be serviceable to the state. Nor will they ever be able to confine within the bounds of duty, those who are daring enough to hazard the penalties they threaten ; those who fancy themselves powerful enough to resist, or artful enough to elude them.

In the political establishments of antiquity, at least, it will be in vain to seek the principles or precepts of perfect virtue. Their legislators paid perhaps too much attention to the aggrandisement of the state ; and certainly too little to the morals of the people. Their systems of policy, like the ethics of their philosophers, were all debased by some mixture of absurdity, inhumanity, or corruption. If we examine what remains of the boasted institutions of Lycurgus or Solon, or of the laws

laws of the Twelve Tables; we shall find that they all ordained or countenanced what was incompatible with good morals; unwarrantable licentiousness*, or the exposure of their children; the combats of the gladiators, or the murder of their slaves.

That these motives do in fact possess a large share of weight and utility in human life, is too obvious to be denied. The united considerations of health and fortune, character and law, must always have a powerful influence on mankind. Within their proper limits they are indeed very valuable and very laudable principles of action. They have, no doubt, on one hand, often checked the artifices of iniquity and the efforts of violence; and on the other, often prompted to exertions and achievements highly honourable to the individual, and beneficial to so-

* The defects of heathen laws and heathen morality might perhaps be most successfully exposed, by insisting on the licentiousness, which they did not in almost any case prohibit with sufficient rigour, and which they too often expressly encouraged. But from the nature of the subject as much evil is probably avoided by waving the argument, as good could be obtained by stating it more at large.

ciety. But in the most important point they all equally fail. They constitute only prudence and policy; not the moral principle required. They may prompt, or they may restrain, the hand; but they cannot rectify the heart and the intention. They have often enforced the offices of decency or justice; but cannot exalt them into virtue and merit. Cicero himself asserts, that practised upon these motives, justice itself is not virtue.

To this must be added, as a motive to duty urged by many of the heathen philosophers, the immortality of the soul, and the rewards and punishments of a life to come. But though these are doctrines, without which religion loses its principal value, and morality its firmest support; we shall not find them either universally or rationally maintained by the sages of antiquity. These doctrines were indeed, like almost every other, disputed by the Sceptic, and by the Cynic furiously denied. The Epicurean sought in his pleasures, and the Stoic in his apathy, the happiness of the present life, with very
little

little regard to any thing beyond it. Even amongst those who maintained a state of retribution hereafter, their notions and their accounts of it are so doubtful and obscure, so full of fable and inconsistency; that it must have been difficult for them to persuade themselves of the reality of what they taught on the subject; and still more difficult to give it weight and efficacy on the minds of others. Socrates employed many arguments to prove the immortality of the soul; but before his judges he left it undecided, whether he expected death to lead him to a state of peaceful insensibility; or to the company and conversation of the great, the wise and the good*. Of all the arguments of antiquity on the subject, the best are undoubtedly to be found in the writings of Plato; yet of these, says his greatest admirer, the Roman orator; when I read them, I am convinced; but when I lay the book aside, and reflect upon them in my own mind, my conviction is gone†. Cicero's own reasoning on the same important question terminates in the unsatisfactory conclu-

* Plat. Phæd.

† Tusc. Quæst. I. II.

sion; that if he was mistaken in his belief, he was pleased with his error, and no man should ravish it from him*.

5. As

* *De Senect. sub finem.*—In his philosophical treatises Cicero has made several of his characters speak ingeniously and eloquently on the subject of a future state, and the immortality of the soul. But in his letters he appears to give up the point; and to be of a very different opinion. For in these he constantly represents death as the end of all things; as a state of perpetual insensibility. “*Mortem nullum sensum habituram,*” “*finem doloris,*” et “*omnium rerum extremum,*” is the language not only of several different letters; but, I believe, on every occasion, where the mention of death is followed by any reflexion upon it. And on the letters, it should seem, notwithstanding Dr. Middleton’s reasoning to the contrary, the greatest dependence ought to be placed. His philosophical disquisitions, in imitation of those of Plato, are thrown into the form of dialogue; and each of the characters may therefore be supposed to speak, not so much the opinions of Cicero, as those of the sect he represents; and to urge the arguments, not which appeared to the author conclusive; but the best which his side of the question admitted, or were then known. It is only indirectly, or by suggestions in some other parts of his writings, that we can learn who speaks the sentiments of Cicero himself. But in his letters he is under no such restraint; nor is he under the influence of any such passion or interest, as should lead him to disguise his real opinions. Had any favourite hypothesis engaged
much

5. As an addition or an improvement to these arguments of the ancients, modern philosophers have urged as the rules or motives of human duty, benevolence, honour, conscience, and a moral sense. But each of these may in a very few words be shewn to be, either vague and indefinite as a rule, or feeble and inefficacious as a motive.

With respect to benevolence ; it is not yet determined whether it is a principle inherent in our nature, or an acquired virtue, or both united. And when that question shall be settled, it will be soon enough to enquire, whether it be in reality felt by all mankind ; in what degree it shall operate towards those whom we have not seen or known ; by what force it shall prevail over personal or national enmity and provocation ; and direct our conduct in opposition to all our selfish and corrupt passions.

much of his thoughts, it must somewhere have made its appearance in so much friendly and confidential correspondence. What is said in the letters may fairly be considered as expressing the settled sentiments of his mind.

With

With respect to honour as a rule of conduct ; not to urge that the term itself is not precisely defined ; it is confessedly a sentiment not innate and natural, but artificial and acquired ; not uniform and universal, but local and variable ; not founded upon any known and general principle, but upon the judgment and caprice of the individual ; and unhappily its laws are as cruel and sanguinary, as they are uncertain and indefinite.

With respect to conscience, as the principle of moral conduct ; it has not only been variously explained in theory ; but in practice has been supposed to dictate very different, and even opposite, rules of action. I shall, however, venture to adopt the definition given by Locke, as too just to be controverted, and too clear to be misunderstood. “ Conscience,” says he, “ is nothing else, but our own opinion or judgment of the moral rectitude or pravity of our own actions *.” Its being right or wrong, therefore,

* Buddeus has left us a definition of conscience so closely resembling this of Locke, that the coincidence would

fore, a safe or an erroneous guide, depends upon previous information. It is a rule, which must itself depend upon some other rule already known: it is the interpreter, not the maker, of the moral law; and far from being a public and general principle, it is known only to the possessor; and may be different in every different individual.

As to the moral sense, if it be not nearly another name for conscience, it is not easy to say what it is. If it be considered as sentiment, rather than reasoning; as that power in the mind, by which we are enabled instantaneously to decide between right and wrong; when we seem rather to feel than to think; it then coincides with one or other of the rules or motives already examined; it is either acquired benevolence, conscience in-

would appear remarkable, could one avoid suspecting that the German theologian must have seen the *Essay* of the English Metaphysician. He was the younger man by more than thirty years. *Conscientia nobis nihil aliud significat, quàm argumentationem hominis de actionibus suis ad legem relatis, ut earum hinc aut pravitatem aut bonitatem colligat.* *Inst. Theol. Moral. cap. 1. 3.*

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formed and matured, or honour ripened into habit.

By modern philosophers, again, it has been supposed and maintained, that man might ascertain the rules of his duty by the exertions of his own understanding; because he might discover its utility and obligation in the natural fitness of things; in the immutability of truth; or in the eternal distinctions between right and wrong.

It is true that by observation and experience we discover in the constitution of nature a wise and wonderful adaptation of one thing to another; the subordination and subservience of every part to the whole; a mutual relation and dependence between the vegetable, the animal, and the rational productions; and that each, while it preserves its proper place and influence, contributes to the subsistence, to the utility, or to the enjoyment of all the rest. But this proves little with respect to human duty. It may indeed suggest a probability, that there will be the same propriety in the exertions of wisdom and virtue; it may lead us to suppose, that

similar advantages in the moral world would result from the due discharge of moral duties; and what analogy suggests, observation tends to confirm. But probability is not certainty; analogy is not demonstration. Observation of the same kind led the heathen philosophers to a very different conclusion: for it led them very early to idolatry; either to worship exclusively the host of heaven, prompted by its magnificence and its benefits; or to suppose the universe itself one perfect and blessed Being, which it was their duty to adore*.

The immutability of truth is to be considered, much in the same light, as the fitness of things. In our arts and sciences the same

* It has been very justly observed too, that the fitness of things cannot form a perfect rule of conduct, unless it be perfectly known to us: and it cannot be perfectly known in our present state; because we cannot know all things, and all their relations. We do not by any means fully understand our own nature, and our relation to each other; and still less our possible, and even probable, relation to other creatures above or below us, to our Creator, to the whole system of things, or to a future state. This rule of duty, therefore, must always be imperfect, in proportion to the imperfection of our knowledge.

premises always lead to the same conclusions; one demonstration invariably confirms another; and in all our experiments, similar causes are constantly followed by similar effects. We conclude therefore that the system holds universally; that physical truth is every where the same, and immutable. But this process of investigation has not yet been successfully applied to the discovery, or the support, of the principles of morality. And though it has been supposed, that moral duties may admit scientific demonstration; till that demonstration is effected, the possibility is no clear or sure foundation of human virtue: the demonstration itself would hardly be authority and obligation.

With respect to the eternal distinctions of right and wrong; it is not intended to call the doctrine in question; but to place it on what appears to be its true foundation. By the advocates for the sufficiency of reason these distinctions seem to be maintained, as something inherent in the nature of things, wholly independent of the will of the Creator; as an original and over-ruling necessity, which omnipotence did not establish,

and cannot change. But surely he who created all things, created all their relations and distinctions. How far it was in the power of the Almighty to have formed different creatures with different relations; or to have created us with other qualities and other duties; it is indeed useless to enquire: but with our limited knowledge of the Deity, the possibility cannot be disproved. His own nature and attributes only can set bounds to the operations of omnipotence. We doubt not but the present constitution of every creature, is congruous to the perfections of the Deity; and from the rectitude, as well as the immutability, of the great Creator, we take it for granted, that neither the relations and fitnesses of things, nor our duties that are connected with them, will undergo any change, while the things themselves and the human race shall continue to exist*. But this

* It has been asked whether a miracle may not be considered as effecting a change in the nature of things. To which it may be very safely answered; that a miracle does not make any such change as will invalidate the observation. A miracle produces an effect without any adequate natural cause; or suspends or alters the operation of natural

this regularity is an effect; and cannot govern its own cause. It is a quality not inherent, but derived; not original, but dependent. Supposing, however, the distinctions of right and wrong to be in the strictest sense unchangeable and eternal; what but the decree of the Almighty could give them the nature and force of law? by what voice or authority otherwise could they have required, or by what sanctions enforced, submission and obedience?

With this fitness, with this truth, and with these distinctions, the moral law of the Christian revelation every where agrees. Our religion is admirably and invariably suited to

tural causes, to a certain extent, and for a specific purpose. But in the mean time every thing beyond the influence of such miracle proceeds in its regular course; and even where its influence was exerted, the particular purpose being answered, the usual order of causes and effects again takes place; beginning however with that state of things which the miracle has occasioned. A miracle, it may be observed again, is in its own nature an exception to every general law; and therefore in reasoning to every general observation: and indeed to argue against changes, whether miraculous or natural, is the business of those who maintain absolute immutability; not mine who deny it.

the nature of things : and the fairest inference seems to be ; not that we could by the one have discovered the other ; but that both, at different periods and in different states of the world, proceeded from the same beneficent author. The system and course of nature would not perhaps have suggested the idea of their own Creator ; but abundantly confirm it when suggested. And with this concurs, in a thousand passages, the language of scripture. But the different portions of scripture were all addressed to men, who had been previously instructed in the existence of the Deity. They were not intended to teach what was already admitted ; but to give satisfaction in believing, by producing evidence of what was believed. What then is the fitness of things in nature, but the ordinance of their Creator ; what are the eternal distinctions of right and wrong, but the appointment of the Almighty ; and what the immutability of moral truth, but the word of God ?

6. It will not be foreign to the subject of the sufficiency of reason, to point out a few of the contradictions of her philosophy ; of the
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the opposite conclusions drawn from the same premises, by the moralists of different times. Reason has been the cause of so many errors, perplexities, and mischiefs in the world, that the academic in Cicero maintains, it cannot be considered as a benefit and a blessing to mankind. But the modern Deist thinks it able to discover truth; and to teach us all our moral and religious duties. Many of the antient philosophers taught that actions were just or unjust, not by the appointment of nature, but only by the dictate of the law. And as many moderns teach the eternal and unalterable distinctions between right and wrong. It has been maintained, that the philosophers of antiquity might have obtained the idea of an immaterial Being; or of God, by considering the nature of their own immaterial souls. But it does not appear that they ever possessed the idea of pure spirit at all; of a substance without any of the qualities of matter: and by many of the moderns this immateriality of the human soul is itself denied. The contemplation of the course of nature and the fitness of things led the antients into polytheism and idolatry; to worship the host of heaven. A super-

ficial examination of them has induced some modern philosophers to assert the eternity of matter and the world; to doubt or deny a Creator and a providence. Plato has asserted, that when men engage in disquisitions on the subject of the Gods, none of their notions take their rise from the human understanding; and Cicero declares that he believed in the Gods of his country, only on the authority of his ancestors. Yet numbers in our own times maintain, that reason alone can discover the existence of the Deity; and even demonstrate his attributes and perfections. Modern philosophers assert it to be the dictate of nature, that the parent should support and educate the child; yet the ancients formerly, like the savages at this day, exposed or destroyed as many of their children, as their convenience or caprice happened to suggest. The moderns think, with Socrates, that the laws of nature require the children to honour, to assist, and support in their age or necessity, those from whom they have derived their being. But many of the sages of antiquity, with the savages of our own times, held it justifiable to destroy their parents; when age or infirmity

mity had rendered them burthenfome to their families or to the ftate. Instances, like thefe, of conclufions fo oppofite from pre-mifes fo fimilar, may furely convince us, that unaffifted reafon is not fagacious enough for our instructor in theology; not certain enough for the principle of duty; nor uniform enough for our guide in practice.

7. Suppofing it poffible, however, that reafon could devife equitable and efficacious rules of conduct, between the different individuals of the fame country and community; a task yet more difficult remains to be performed; to eftablifh and enforce the principles of juftice between different and independent nations, in their friendly or hostile intercourfe with each other; in their commerce or their wars.

What have been ufually called the laws of nations have had all the defects of municipal laws, and many others of their own. The terms themfelves have been indefinitely underftood, and variously explained; and the laws, far from being, what fuch laws evidently ought to be, uniform and univerfal,

sal, have never been even general or consistent. They have not only been different in different nations; when those nations have differed from each other in their sentiments, their habits, and their degrees of civilization; but even in the same country they have been often changed; as changes have taken place in the circumstances or opinions of the people or their sovereigns. They have not been formed upon any certain and acknowledged principles; they have few established precedents; few general maxims; and few regular analogies. For reason has not yet decided, whether they are founded upon nature or compact alone, or upon both united. They are indeed little else than maxims and usages mutually admitted by independent sovereignties; as long as their utility in each particular case is mutually confessed: and it appears from the history of mankind, that nations have rarely expected each other to adhere to them; when a more immediate or more important interest was likely to be promoted by their violation. By what persuasions, indeed, by what menaces or penalties, shall nature and reason secure us against wantonness in the commencement
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of war, or inhumanity in the prosecution of it; against absurdity or injustice in the formation of treaties, or treachery in their violation; or against any other artifice or outrage, which, however stigmatised abroad, can be applauded as patriotism at home. Could laws, however, for independent nations, be devised of the most perfect equity and wisdom; still with reason alone to support them, they must want, what is essential to all laws, the acknowledged authority of a common superior, to enforce submission and obedience. The only common superior of kingdoms is he by whom they were created; and their only authoritative rule of conduct, the precepts of his revelation.

It is true that nations, professing to believe the Christian revelation, too often violate its precepts in their transactions with each other. For it is true, more frequently perhaps in the conduct of nations than of individuals, that the influence of corrupt passions, or the prospect of immediate interest, prevails over justice and principle. But the question here is, not whether the laws of nations, as founded upon the precepts

cepts of revelation, have been violated or fulfilled; but whether they are wise and just in themselves, and founded upon adequate authority: not what crimes have been committed by the errors and transgressions of individuals; but what has been ordained and approved, by the deliberate decrees of a senate, or the unbiaſſed voice of a people. That revelation has not yet had its due effect on the morals of mankind, has indeed been urged by the gainſayer, as an objection to its efficacy, or its authenticity; but will in no degree prove that it is not the only proper baſis of the law of nations. That theſe laws have in fact been eſſentially improved by the influence of the Chriſtian revelation, hiſtory itſelf will abundantly teſtify. Whatever were the virtues of the Athenians, when Pericles preſided in the ſtate, and morality was taught by Socrates; and whatever were the boaiſted refinements of the Romans, when Auguſtus gave them laws, and Cicero was their inſtructor in philoſophy; ſtill in their tranſactions with foreign countries, their rules of conduct were leſs humane and equitable, than thoſe of any nation, however inferior in other reſpects, which has felt the
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benign influence of Christianity*. Whatever may have been the errors of papal superstitions; and whatever may have been in other respects the mischiefs of papal usurpations; they have been attended with one obvious good effect; the general union of the kingdoms of Europe under one spiritual head, contributed essentially to render the laws of nations amongst them more mild and

* From many instances that might be adduced in proof of this assertion, take only the difference of their treatment of prisoners of war. Both the Greeks and Romans considered captives taken in battle as the absolute property of the conqueror; on the principle, probably, that the life he had spared was entirely at his disposal; and that he was consequently at liberty to retain, or to sell them, for slaves; to put them to death; or to dispose of them in any other way, at his own discretion: and if these unfortunate men experienced any milder treatment, they were indebted for it, not to any laws in their favour, but to the justice, the humanity, or the policy of the individual.

In all Christian countries, on the contrary, hostility ceases with resistance: the lives of all who submit, are spared upon principle; and the prisoners are supported by their conquerors, till they are exchanged or released. At least, if the captives do not always find this humanity, it arises, not from want of equitable regulations on the subject, but from the caprice or cruelty of individuals; it is not from the observance of law, but the violation of it.

equitable, as well as more uniform and consistent. For some of the earliest and greatest improvements in the laws of nations, we are indebted to the genius and the policy of Charlemagne; and these laws are brought nearly to perfection in the system of Grotius. But both the prince and the philosopher were indebted for their precepts to the principles of the Christian religion, and depend for their observance on its authority. If indeed the transactions of policy are ever to be governed by the rules of good morals; if the distinctions of country are ever to be disregarded in the exercise of justice and benevolence; and if the great republic of mankind is ever to attain to that perfection in its laws, of which it appears by nature to be capable; this surely can be effected only by the precepts of such a revelation, as we believe to have been given; sanctioned by that authority, from which the revelation itself professes to be derived*.

8. Before we quit the subject of the pretended sufficiency of reason to teach men,

* See Ward on the Law of Nations.

their duty, and to enforce the practice of it; it is not without importance to consider the date of the objection, which has been drawn from thence, to the necessity and the truth of a divine revelation. At the time of our Saviour's appearance in the world, whatever other reasons were assigned for not receiving him as a teacher come from God; it was never suggested that his instructions were not wanted; that mankind did not stand in need of some such information, as he professed to communicate. Even his enemies among the Jews acknowledged, that his doctrine was superior to whatever they had heard; *that never man spake like this man.* Amidst all the opposition made to the apostles; amidst all the reproach, with which they were loaded; and all the persecution they endured; it does not appear that a divine revelation was ever considered as superfluous and useless; the sufficiency of human reason, for the purposes of religion and morality, was not once pleaded against them. *Christ crucified was indeed to the Jews a stumbling block, and to the Greeks foolishness;* but they did not deny the want of assistance from heaven. The objection is in fact of very modern

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dern date ; and has been insisted on solely by those, whose own reason has been enlightened by the revelation they oppose ; who were furnished by the religion itself, with the arms they would use for its destruction.

This seems to have arisen from errors which, however important, are neither unnatural nor unfrequent. The fundamental truths of religion were taught us so early, that we cannot recollect the time when they were unknown to us ; and our faculties are so fitted for their reception, that we fancy we were able to have discovered them. They are so adapted to our nature and situation, that we suppose they either are self-evident, or so obvious that no man could overlook them. The moral precepts of the gospel are found upon examination to be perfectly equitable in themselves, and excellently adapted to the purposes of human life ; and this discovery of their equity and aptitude, has been mistaken for the discovery of the precepts themselves. Perhaps men confound memory with invention ; and do not distinguish between what they have learnt from instruction, and what they have attained by investigation.

tigation. Perhaps, too, vanity inclines them to ascribe to their own sagacity, what they have been taught by revelation; and when they trace in the creation the proofs of the existence and power of the Creator, whom scripture or tradition has announced, they fancy they have discovered by their own reason and observation, what their own reason and observation have only confirmed. It is one thing to perceive the truth of a proposition when suggested to the mind; and another for the mind to suggest the proposition to itself. Philosophers both antient and modern have been able to produce many arguments in support of the truths that have been revealed. They have explored, with great diligence and skill, the wonderful labyrinth of nature, and discovered many testimonies of the power, the wisdom, and the goodness of the architect; but the clue to what they should find there had been previously put into their hands by revelation. I press this point the more earnestly; because it is an error which appears to infect the minds and writings of many ingenious men; of many who deny the truth of revelation; and of some who believe it. It seems indeed to be

at least one source of that indifference to the duties of devotion, which unhappily marks the character of the present times; and to have occasioned not a few of the mistakes and controversies on the subject of natural religion.

9. It must be observed too that they who, in asserting the ample powers of reason, ascribe to the philosophers of antiquity sufficient knowledge of ethics and theology, ascribe to them what they do not claim for themselves.

With respect to religion, * Plato declares, that in order to understand what is divine, the mind wants divine illumination; as much as, to discern the proper objects of vision, the eye wants the light of the sun: and with regard to morality, it was the opinion of Socrates †, that all attempts to reform the world would be without success; unless the Deity should in his mercy commission a teacher to instruct mankind in their duty. Cicero ‡ wished for a new argument

* De Repub. Lib. 6.

† Plat. Apol. Socr.

‡ Tusc. Quæst. 5, 7.

to prove that virtue alone would constitute happiness: and * Jamblichus acknowledges, that there is but one remedy for all the doubts and errors of mankind; and that is, to obtain, if possible, some portion of divine illumination. Quotations of the same tendency might be multiplied to almost any extent; but these are enough to exhibit philosophy complaining of its own insufficiency, and lamenting its own defects; disclaiming for itself those discoveries, for which zeal for an hypothesis would give it credit; and, while it is adduced as superseding the necessity of a divine revelation, giving its own voluntary suffrage in its favour.

10. By the gainfayer of modern times it may yet be maintained, that this supposed revelation, with all its boasted excellence in doctrines and precepts, is itself the invention and contrivance of human reason; that its rules of morality are not superior to those of the heathen philosophers in a higher degree than might reasonably be expected, from the progressive cultivation and improvement of

* De Myst. 3, 18.

the human mind; and that its doctrines are by priestcraft and policy only rendered more solemn and mysterious; in order more fully to answer the purpose of such inventions; that they may operate the more powerfully on the weak and timid; and the more effectually secure the authority of the cunning and the daring.

Upon the minds of men, who maintain sentiments like these, the superior excellence of the ethics and theology of the Christian revelation can have little effect. Against them therefore we must urge the more decisive argument; that reason could not invent the prophecies and their completion in the person and conduct of our Saviour; nor give the power of working miracles, in attestation of his doctrines, to himself and his apostles: and till the credit of these can be shaken, they will be sufficient to prove that our religion is, what it professes to be, a revelation from heaven.

11. Admitting, however, in the last place, what certainly can be admitted only for the sake of argument, that the light of nature
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and reason has in reality enabled men to discover all that has ever been ascribed to it; admitting that the sages of antiquity taught not only all the moral and social duties; but also a rational system of religion, and a consistent and credible account of a future state of retribution; still their discoveries can come in no competition with what the gospel has revealed. They offer no encouragement under the frailties, which all men feel; no consolation under the sense of those transgressions, into which the best men occasionally fall. Their system of future reward and punishment could be only a system of rigid and inflexible justice; and the prospect consequently more likely to inspire terror than resolution; despair, rather than hope.

The fairest boast of the advocates of reason is the character and conduct of Socrates; yet his behaviour in his last moments affords ample proof of the imperfection of his religion. He makes no mention of the one true God; expresses no confidence in his goodness; no hope in his mercy; and does not seem to expect, for he does not solicit,

any pardon for errors or for crimes*. He felt remorse of conscience indeed; but it was only for not having paid due attention to the god of dreams; and therefore in obedience to his supposed directions, prepares for death, by translating the fables of Æsop, and writing hymns in honour of Apollo. With his last breath he requests his friend to perform for him a sacrifice of idolatry and superstition †.

* It is observable also, that in the dying man's address to the Supreme Being, in Epictetus, there is no dejection of mind from a sense of guilt, no confession of error or imperfection, and consequently no petition for pardon. But there is a great deal of confidence, ostentation, and arrogance. Yet Epictetus was one of the best men of the best sect of philosophers. Vid. Epict. Dissert. 4. 10.

† Plat. Phæd. Sub Fin. I am aware that various and widely different interpretations have been given of this celebrated injunction to Crito. But the most obvious seems the best. It does not appear to have been delivered by Socrates as having any hidden or mysterious meaning; or to have been so understood by his friends who heard it. Socrates always worshipped the gods of his country in the customary forms, and exhorted his followers to do the same: and why should we seek for a far-fetched interpretation of the words, when the natural and obvious sense is consistent with the general sentiments and general practice of him who spoke them.

In opposition to these doubtful and gloomy prospects, the Christian revelation instructs us to look up to the Deity, not only as a creator, but as a protector; whose benevolence is equal to his power; and whose justice is tempered with mercy. It teaches us, that our own exertions will be assisted and supported in forming right opinions, and carrying them into effect and practice; and that not only the transgressions of human frailty may be finally forgiven; but that even human virtue and piety may become entitled to an everlasting reward. For it teaches the inestimable doctrines of the influence of grace; the efficacy of repentance; the atonement of the death of Christ; and the resurrection to happiness and glory.

With those who assert that the powers of reason are sufficient for all the purposes of religion and morality, these doctrines of our scriptures may have little weight; because they may obtain little attention or credit. But these are the points, which the advocate of Christianity should never cease to urge; for they are the basis of all his own best

hopes, and of the triumph of his religion; they are what finally establish the excellence, the superiority, and the necessity of a divine revelation,

SERMON III.

ON THE PROBABILITY, INDEPENDENTLY OF THE DIRECT EVIDENCE, THAT GOD HAS REVEALED HIS WILL TO MANKIND; THAT THIS REVELATION IS THE ORIGINAL FOUNDATION OF ALL RELIGION AMONGST THEM; AND THAT THE HISTORY, THE DOCTRINES, AND THE PRECEPTS OF THIS REVELATION ARE CONTAINED IN THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT.

ROM. x. 17.

Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

IN stating, on a former occasion, the necessity of divine instruction, to correct the errors of the heathen philosophers in ethics and theology; it was not intended to have it supposed, that the truths of the new testament were the whole of the revelation, with which mankind have been favoured by their Creator:

Creator : and when the knowledge and opinions of those philosophers were considered as the discoveries of unassisted reason ; it was by no means designed to have it understood, that this was the true state of the case. But for the sake of perspicuity in the disquisition, the customary language was adopted ; the subject was taken in the ordinary point of view. I shall now state more explicitly, and endeavour to support by argument, what I conceive to be truth ; and what has indeed already been suggested ; that all religion whatever took its rise in the first instance from divine revelation ; that not in Christianity only, but in every other religious system, *faith came originally by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.*

From our limited information respecting the earlier generations of mankind, and the scantiness or obscurity of ancient records, historical testimony, exclusive of our scriptures, directly and explicitly to the point, cannot perhaps be found ; and from the nature of the subject, and as it should seem, from the intentions of providence, scientific demonstration and indisputable certainty cannot

cannot be obtained. But, by such evidence as the case appears to admit, I shall hope to render it probable and credible; that mankind did not by the exertion of their own faculties, either in the examination of the constitution and course of nature, or in abstract and metaphysical reasoning, discover the existence and attributes of the Deity, or their own duties and obligations to him; but that they were instructed in these important points by the Creator himself, for their benefit and improvement; for their present comfort and future happiness. I shall endeavour to shew that a divine revelation is not, as has been asserted, a circumstance in its own nature so improbable, that scarce any testimony can render it credible; but that it is a dispensation of providence reasonably to be believed; because reasonably to have been expected; and of which the probability, independently of the direct and proper evidence, is hardly less than the necessity. I shall endeavour to shew, that in all the false religions, which have appeared in the world, strong vestiges may yet be traced of their having been derived originally by history or tradition from the true; and,
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what is indeed not only the most important point, but the end and aim of all the rest, that the only authentic records of such divine revelation, of its history and its doctrines, are to be found in our scriptures.

Though these objects of the disquisition are in some respects distinct from each other, they will all be constantly kept in view, and pursued together; for they all tend to support the same general conclusion, and terminate in the same point.

From what causes, and in what degree, this revelation has been perverted or neglected, denied, or disobeyed, has been in some measure already explained*; and does not form a necessary part of the present enquiry. The foulness of the stream at a distance does not prove its want of transparency at the source; it proves only the impurities of the soil through which it has passed.

If then the different positions, that have been advanced, can be rendered credible; if

* In Sermon I.

each shall appear more probable than its reverse; they will not indeed form the best, or alone, sufficient ground of faith in the gospel of Christ; but they will be entitled to the attention of those, who dispute or deny the direct evidence; and they may bring some additional conviction to those who receive it.

As far too as these positions shall appear to be well supported, they will invalidate all objection to the necessity or the credibility of a divine revelation, from the supposed sufficiency of natural religion. And to natural religion so much has been allowed, even by many distinguished advocates of Christianity, that they have furnished the Deist with some of his best arguments against themselves and their cause*.

Before

* It would have materially narrowed the ground of controversy with the Deists, had they at the outset declared, how far in their opinion reason was able to go; what were her real or supposed discoveries; or in other words, what were the articles of their creed. This they have not explicitly done. But many Christian divines seem to have admitted for them; that the existence, the attributes,

Before we proceed, however, to the more immediate business of the present enquiry, it seems

attributes, and the providence of God; that the rules and obligations of our moral and religious duties, and the rewards and punishments of a life to come, are discoverable by the mere light of nature and reason. And in this they appear to me to have admitted, more than is consistent with the interests of divine revelation and truth; and that for several reasons.

1. If reason could have discovered all that is allowed; she could have discovered all that revelation has told us; except what are usually called its mysterious doctrines; such as the influence of Grace; the divine nature of Christ; and the atonement by his death. Now how important soever these doctrines may be in themselves, and how clearly soever we may suppose them revealed in scripture; it is well known that all and each of them have been controverted or denied; not only by those who do not admit the truth of the Christian revelation; but by many who profess to believe it. The Deist therefore is allowed by these concessions to maintain, that the Christian religion has made no other addition to natural, than some points of *doubtful disputation*.

2. If it be urged that our Saviour's appearance on earth was necessary, to confirm and to give authority to the truths, which reason had discovered sufficient grounds to believe; it must be observed, that our Saviour's confirming or giving the authority of laws to such truths, depends wholly upon his own authority's being first admitted; that is, upon the truth of the Christian revelation. He did

seems necessary to take some notice of the important subject of natural religion ; and
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did not, for example, physically or logically demonstrate the reality of a future state of retribution : he only declared it : and what credit is due to his declaration depends entirely upon his veracity ; that is, upon the general truth of his mission.

3. If it be supposed that the Creator at first endowed men with such faculties as to enable them, by the study of their own nature, and the nature of the objects around them, to discover, to any given extent, the rules and obligations of their duty ; and that he afterwards made more immediately from himself, important additions and improvements ; conveyed to men in a different manner, and resting on a different foundation ; we cannot perceive in this instance that unity of design and operation, which appears so conspicuous in the other proceedings of the Deity. It should seem much more probable, that the Creator would either, according to the sentiments of the Deist, have endowed his creatures in the first instance with faculties sufficient to discover all that it was necessary for them to know ; or that he would, according to the hypothesis of these lectures, have given a revelation as the only rule, authority, and obligation for our moral and religious duties ; leaving to reason only the easier task of discovering the rectitude, the fitness and the utility of his laws ; that we might obey them with the greater readiness and satisfaction.

4. How far reason was able in the state of innocence, or how far she might be able in any supposed state of improvement,

to state in what sense precisely I would understand the terms. If by natural religion, its advocates mean all such doctrines and precepts as, when once proposed to the mind,

provement, to discover the rules and obligations of human duty, may amuse as a question of speculation; but whether she ever did, previously to all instruction, make any such discoveries, appears to be wholly a question of fact: and to those, who believe our scriptures to be *the oracles of God*, it is obvious she was not left to perform so difficult a task. The knowledge of his Creator and his duty, communicated to Adam, must have been transmitted from him, with more or less accuracy, to all his posterity. See the Sermon, § 4.

5. Our divines probably have made, or been supposed to make, such large concessions to the light of nature and reason, from some of the mistakes enumerated in Serm. 2, § 8; and from their anxiety to establish the consistency between reason and revelation. Some such mistakes appear to affect the whole of *Wollaston's Religion of Nature delineated*, of *Wilkins's Treatise on the principles and duties of natural religion*, and of many other works of great merit and celebrity. Even Clarke himself, certainly one of the most learned, the most ingenious, and the most candid advocates of natural religion, appears to defend it, not as what unassisted reason did or could discover, but as what reason in her present state, enlarged by general science, and illuminated by divine revelation, that is, what the reason of Dr. Clarke, is able to prove to be true, and fit, and right.

right reason must approve; or all such as are so agreeable to the nature of things and the nature of man, that when once known they may be supported or confirmed by arguments from thence; they may fairly be understood to mean a great part of the truths of Christianity; all those, at least, which immediately regard morality and its sanctions; which teach our duty to our Creator and our fellow-creatures, and our reward or punishment in a life to come. It is one of the peculiar excellencies of our religion, that it is adapted to our nature and situation; to the hopes and wishes of rational creatures; of those for whose use it declares itself to have been given. The harmony between the dictates of revelation and the deductions of right reason, is one of the proofs that both have proceeded from the same beneficent author.

But if by natural religion its advocates mean a religion, which the light of nature and reason alone could have discovered, or did actually discover; they maintain what appears much less capable of being supported by adequate proof; and what it is one pur-
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pose of the present disquisition to oppose. In this latter sense, however, natural religion seems to have been understood and defended, by some of the ablest advocates of revelation; by men whose names are deservedly ranked with the most illustrious in our theology. The arguments, therefore, in favour of a different hypothesis, will be offered with all the diffidence, which such opponents must naturally inspire; and with such respect for their sentiments, as their talents and their celebrity so justly demand. Were the point to be decided by authority, however, names of not much less celebrity might be brought forward in favour of the theory intended to be maintained; and in support of which the arguments shall now be produced.

1. The probability of a divine revelation, it is obvious, would be best supported by examining and vindicating the nature and the history of that which we receive as such. It would appear most credible, from a statement of its direct evidence; from a display of the value, the wisdom, and the coincidence of the successive communications that

have been made to mankind by Adam, and by the patriarchs and prophets, by Moses, and by Jesus Christ. We should find our faith best confirmed, by considering the variety, the series, and the application of the prophecies; the number, the nature, and the testimony of the miracles; and the utility, the superiority, and the sanctions of the moral precepts of the gospel. It is one of the first duties of the advocate of Christianity, to shew that it is every way worthy of the Deity, from whom it declares itself to be derived; that all its means and instruments are wisely adapted to their respective ends and purposes; that its commands and prohibitions, threats and promises, are reconcileable to the attributes, which it ascribes to their author; that its narratives suitably illustrate what they profess, the perfections and providence of God; and, in short, to clear the difficulties, and answer the objections that have been urged against it; whether they respect its doctrines or its precepts, its evidence, or its records. But these points must be left to those who undertake to discuss them. The design here is to consider, what probability of a divine

revelation, as a reality in itself, and as the original source of all religion, can be found in the acknowledged attributes of the Deity; in the constitution and course of nature; and in the antient history or present situation of mankind: or in other words, what marks of credibility, internal or external, appear in favour of our scriptures, without previously admitting their authenticity.

2. If a divine revelation be probable in itself; it is probably the original source of all religion: and a divine revelation is itself probable, in the first place, from the very notion of a Creator and his essential attributes. I do not here enter into any metaphysical disquisition on the nature and perfections of the Deity; but I take his benevolence for granted; because it is not easy to conceive the existence of his other acknowledged attributes, if this be excluded: there cannot be perfection without it. I take his benevolence for granted; because omniscience cannot err in the prosecution of its purposes; and omnipotence can have no temptation to desire, or to do, what is not merciful and good; and because it is not
credible

credible that any other motive could induce the Almighty to create mankind, than to communicate happiness. To have created them for any other purpose would imply weakness or malevolence; weakness, that was unable, or malevolence, that was unwilling, to confer happiness on his creatures; both which are in their own nature defects or imperfections; and therefore incompatible with all our ideas of a self-existent perfect Being.

The same benevolence then, which induced the Deity to create mankind, we can have no doubt, would induce him to communicate to them such information and instruction, as their nature and situation required; to give them such a revelation, as would lead them to those enjoyments, for which he must have designed them. It is here indeed that all the value, and all the necessity, of a divine revelation, which have been already stated, might be again adduced in support of its probability. Whatever proves it to have been wanted, will prove that it has probably been given. It is inconsistent with every sentiment we enter-

tain of a Creator, to suppose he would give existence to a world, and not provide for its well-being; and above all, that he would leave the most exalted of his creatures upon it in a worse situation than the rest; without an object adequate to the capacities, with which he has endowed them; with a possibility of suffering the most exquisite misery; and without a corresponding possibility of attaining consummate enjoyment. But on the contrary, nothing can be, to our apprehension, more equitable, than that the Creator should give laws to his own creation; nothing more suitable to his perfections; than to do what was so necessary to be done. Thus far then does natural probability support the credit of what we conceive to be a divine revelation; and the narratives of scripture are consistent with what our own deductions would teach us to expect.

3. It is in the next place probable that all religion was derived originally from divine revelation; because no other probable origin can be assigned. It may be maintained, with great appearance of truth, that man could not from the light of nature, or by any exertion

ertion of his own faculties, ever have obtained the idea of a Creator and a God. That nature has not impressed any distinct notions upon the human mind; that we have not any ideas innate and unborrowed; is now admitted by our ablest philosophers. It is admitted too, that all the ideas we actually possess, were either received immediately by the senses, or have been obtained by the recollection, or the comparison, by the combination, or the division of such as the senses have conveyed to us. The mind may vary its ideas beyond any known limits; but cannot create them: it cannot suggest them to itself. If then instruction be excluded, all the ideas we can acquire, will be ideas of material and sensible objects alone; and these can by no combination or division form the idea of a Being immaterial and spiritual. And if they could not furnish the primary and fundamental notion of the existence of a God; much less could they teach the complicated doctrines of creation and providence; of our obligations and dependence; of worship, obedience and responsibility. Were this consideration pursued to its utmost extent, and stated in its full force, it would

not perhaps be easily refuted. But not to dwell on what may be thought abstruse and metaphysical; there is one part of it more connected with facts, and more obvious to common apprehension.

In the supposition that all our ideas of God and religion are of human invention, human power of invention seems to be over-rated. Human inventions do not appear ever to have been original discoveries; discoveries of ideas, arts or sciences, totally new, totally different from any thing known before; but improvements of what nature had already begun; applications of the same materials to other purposes; from investigations obviously suggested and prompted by objects of sense. One of the noblest of human acquisitions, for example, is the art of navigation; yet its progress to its present excellence may be plausibly and probably traced, from the tree thrown by the tempest into the river, and floating down the stream. Another of our most valuable discoveries is confessedly the art of printing: yet this seems to have been no great difficulty, when impressions of every ordinary object had been observed

observed in the clay or the sand. Whether an alphabet was the gift of divine wisdom, or the invention of human genius; when once men had agreed upon the use and meaning of arbitrary signs, the wonder seems to be, not that the art of printing was discovered at all, but that it was not discovered at a much earlier period of the world*.

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* On these points one of the most natural, because most important enquiries, is; whence did men first learn to sow and plant, and above all, to convert grain into bread. In favour of our general hypothesis we might suppose the Creator to have taught these arts to the original progenitors of mankind; nor is the supposition without probability in itself, or countenance from scripture. Whatever arts were indispensably necessary to the support of human life, must have been immediately taught to those, who could not otherwise sufficiently early have obtained a knowledge of them: and if, according to our scriptures, Adam was placed in paradise, *to keep it, and to dress it*, it is obvious, he must have been instructed, so as to be enabled to perform the task required.

But if we suppose these arts to be of human invention, the discovery does not appear to have required more sagacity than has been exerted on other occasions. While the human race consisted but of a small number in a favourable climate; supposing with our scriptures, that they ever existed under such circumstances; it is certainly possible they might subsist upon fruits alone. No great degree of
attention

Were the whole of our arts and sciences to be carefully examined, it would be found, that they have all been reared from small

attention was required to observe, that the seeds of vegetables dropped upon the ground, and that other vegetables of the same kind sprang up in their place; and not greater reflection to consider, that this process might be turned to advantage by human industry and skill. When once it was known, by whatever means, whether inspiration or experiment, that farinacious grains were nutritious; it seems by no means improbable, that the constant desire to render them more useful, more salubrious, or more palatable, should in time lead to the complex process which now takes place in the production of bread from grain. In these, however, and most other useful arts, the fact seems to be, that providence placed the materials before us, and endowed us with faculties to employ them. He gave the grain and the grape; and implanted in us instincts to prompt us to make experiments, and sagacity to conduct them. But how far it might be necessary to instruct our first parents for their immediate subsistence and comfort; or how far individuals may have been since endowed with superior talents, for the sake of making such improvements, as would not have been made by men of ordinary abilities; where the immediate instruction of the Creator ceases, and the effects of exertions merely human take place; this is a point which may for ever be disputed, because it cannot be precisely ascertained; probabilities only can be adduced on either side of the question; and the persevering controvertist, therefore, never can be silenced.

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beginnings, and advanced to their present state by such gradual or accidental improvements, as have with some licence of language been denominated inventions and discoveries. But by whatever names they have been distinguished, and whatever may have been their merit and utility, they have all been suggested by objects of sense; and have led to ideas and opinions of sensible objects alone: they cannot be shewn to have ever suggested the notion of spirit; of a being, whose nature and qualities are different and opposite to all that we have seen and known; of a Deity, a Creator, and a providence.

This theory may be in some degree supported by an appeal to facts. The philosophers of antiquity were not led by their speculations to any such conclusions. From contemplating the course of nature and its regularity; that nothing new is produced, that nothing old is lost; that objects only decay and revive; they were led to infer, and with some appearance of reason, the eternity of matter; they did not discover, and they did not believe, the existence of spirit.

rit*. In all their disquisitions the human soul, and the Gods themselves, are confi-

* In the various notices or disquisitions, which occur in the writings of Cicero, on the nature of the human soul, he never appears to suppose it to be pure spirit. It is every where considered as air, or fire, or æther, or some other matter, however subtle or unknown: and the same observation may be made with respect to his notions of the Gods. He has made Cotta say, what he himself appears to have thought, *Nihil est quod vacet corpore.* *Nat. Deor.* i. 23. Were the writings of all the antient philosophers examined on the same point, the same observation would, I think, be the result; though some very distinguished writers of our own country are of a different opinion; particularly with respect to Plato. I have, however, generally considered what is said by Cicero as sufficiently representing the sentiments of all the rest. His sagacity and powers of reasoning were not inferior to those of any Greek or Roman author that went before him. He had the assistance of all their writings; and had studied them with great diligence. He has on some occasion or other stated what were, on most of the great questions amongst them, the opinions of all the principal sects of their philosophers; and his statements appear to be both candid and perspicuous; and he was the last philosopher of such eminence before the birth of Christ. What he, therefore, has not said, may fairly be considered, either as not then known, or not thought worthy of notice. What Cicero did not discover, in religion and morality, may surely be considered as beyond the reach of human reason. This, I hope, will be a sufficient apology for my referring to him so much more frequently, than to any other author.

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dered as material. Their best idea of creation, wherever they obtained it, was only to reduce confusion into order, to form a world from a chaos; and the employment of the Supreme Being, according to their most exalted notions of it, was either, as an agent separate and distinct, to arrange the universe, and preserve the arrangement; or as an essential part of the whole, as the soul of the world itself, to give it animation and activity; to guide and govern its operations. To argue from the properties of matter to the existence of spirit; or to suppose that something was formed from nothing; was a step in reasoning, to which their philosophy was not equal. It is indeed a gulph in logic; which the human understanding does not seem able to pass. The fact is discoverable only by instruction; it is credible only upon testimony; intelligible only where the attributes of the Deity are already acknowledged.

4. The probability that some divine revelation has been given, may be yet further supported by considering, that the constitution of human nature and the condition of
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human life have always been such, as to stand much in need of information; and yet that most of the information required can be obtained only by instruction. Our instincts are fewer and weaker than those of most other animals; less certain in their operations, and less valuable in their effects. We do not, like them, intuitively distinguish what is useful from what is noxious; what is dangerous from what is safe. We do not know food from poison; the animal intended for our subsistence, from the beast of prey that would destroy us. We are not able for many years to provide for our own subsistence; and still less for our defence and protection. From hence will follow conclusions of very material importance.

It will follow that man was created in a state of maturity; because had he not been so created, he never could have reached it. By no efforts of his own could he ever have been reared from infancy to manhood. It will follow too, that such instruction must have been given to him, as was necessary to his nature and situation. For without it he must have perished, long before he could
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have made such observations and experiments, as were requisite for his subsistence and preservation; and to such instruction accordingly our endowments are adapted. Instead of instincts alone; which obtain of themselves all the objects they are permitted to obtain, and can be assisted only to a fixed and very limited extent; we are endued also with the nobler faculty of reason; which is capable of receiving instruction beyond any known limits; and of profiting by what it has received. As instruction must have been at first the principal source of information, so does it continue. The greatest part of our knowledge is obtained from others, during the years of infancy and youth; and no man has powers, even if life allowed him time, to attain by his own efforts as much as it is necessary for him to know; as much as is required, perhaps to his subsisting at all, and certainly to his subsisting with that comfort and enjoyment; of which his Creator has given him both the capacity and the desire. We are not, therefore, more inclined by nature, than impelled by necessity, to unite in society for mutual information and mutual support. What we know was in a great degree

degree received from others; and they in their turn received it from those who went before them. Each successive generation has made but a small addition to the science of its predecessors. Thus the greatest part of the arts and the philosophy of the Western nations may be traced backwards to Italy; from Italy to Greece; and from Greece to Egypt and the East. Of individual philosophers too, each has found instructors in such as had pursued the same studies before him. Cicero was greatly indebted to Plato; Plato to Socrates; Socrates to Anaxagoras and Archelaus; and they to others; till we reach much more nearly than could have been expected, if the nature of ancient records be considered, to the time, the places, and the persons; to whom, as our scriptures inform us, the divine communications were made.

These communications must at first have extended, not only to the religious and moral duties of man, but to his subsistence and preservation. And to what was at first given from heaven, we were intended, and have been prompted, to make continual additions; by

by our natural love of knowledge, and capacity of improvement; by the native activity of our faculties; and the necessities of our situation. But divine information appears to have been the seed, however small, from which sprung the abundant harvest of science, which we now enjoy; it was the original ray, however feeble, which has since blazed, as a meridian sun, and illuminated every civilized nation of the world. The supposition then of a divine revelation corresponds equally with the declarations of scripture, and the faculties of man; with natural probability, and the records of general history. It accounts fairly too, for what could not otherwise be so satisfactorily accounted for; that knowledge in religion appears to be at least as antient, as skill in the most simple sciences; that the former has often been the best source of the latter; and at least a collateral and auxiliary stream through every nation and every age.

5. That a divine revelation was given to the original progenitors of our species, may again be considered as probable; because no other probable era can be assigned for the

commencement of religion amongst mankind. If religion was the discovery of reason; it may naturally be enquired, in what country and in what period of the world, so important a discovery was made; and a satisfactory answer will not easily be found. The human mind, with its utmost efforts, advances but slowly in abstract speculations. They are generally one of the last studies, in which it becomes fashionable in any country to engage; at least they are among the last, which in the most improved state of our faculties, are prosecuted with advantage and success. On the supposition, therefore, that no divine revelation has been given; the most natural conclusion is, that many centuries must have elapsed before mankind had any religion at all; that some nations would yet be found, by whom it had not been received; or amongst whom it was still in its infancy; and that those, which have formed the most regular system of faith and worship, would retain some remembrance or record of its commencement, its progress, and its completion. But with this conclusion acknowledged facts by no means correspond. If we examine the histories of nations up-
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wards to their earliest periods, we still find they had a religion. In the decrees of their senates, in the speculations of their philosophers, or in the superstitions of the people, are found indisputable traces of this religion; not only as existing, but as having been long established. We find a belief in divinities and their attributes and actions; not as recently discovered, but as always professed; not in its infancy, or of any assignable date; but extending upwards beyond their memory or calculation; as the religion of any given period; because it had been the religion of their ancestors. Of these circumstances what other consistent account can be given, but that religion is the offspring of divine revelation; and, as the cause must have been before the effect, that this revelation is coeval with the origin of mankind.

6. The probability of this revelation may be yet further maintained, from many other points of the coincidence of profane, with sacred, history; and of the phenomena of nature, with the narratives of scripture. The universal migrations of mankind from East to West, in which antient history and

present appearances so remarkably agree, clearly point out Asia as the cradle of the human race; they render it credible and probable that our original ancestors resided where Moses has placed them. Nor must we overlook the obvious and striking resemblance between the customs and manners, the doctrine and discipline of the ancient Jews, and those of the oriental nations in our own times; which modern enquirers have with so much diligence and ability examined and ascertained. It cannot be otherwise accounted for, than by supposing both to be derived from one common origin; to be kindred branches of the same parent stock.

The philosophical and physical enquiries into the present structure and circumstances of the earth; into the situation of its strata and its minerals, its mountains and its lakes; all tend to shew that it must have undergone such changes, as might reasonably be expected from the effects of the deluge recorded in our scriptures. The studies of the naturalist furnish a testimony in favour of the veracity of the sacred historians.

The late periods at which many parts of the globe appear to have been peopled; the state in which we yet find commerce and colonization; and the present numbers of the human race, are strong indications of the novelty of the world; they form at least a presumptive proof, that the date of the creation is such, as the Jewish lawgiver has assigned. The extravagant pretensions of the Indians and the Chinese, to an almost immeasurable antiquity, are now refuted and exploded; and no authentic records carry us back beyond the chronology of scripture.

But perhaps the present state, and the continual improvement of arts and sciences bear the strongest collateral testimony in favour of the authority of sacred writ. There are no reasonable grounds to suppose them of greater antiquity than the accounts in our bible would make them. It is true, indeed, that we can know little of the acquisitions and the sciences of former ages, but what history has told us; and history was not likely to be written, till a considerable progress had been made in the more necessary arts of life. It does not follow, therefore,

that what history does not record, did not exist; that what is in our accounts the most antient, was therefore the first. But this is opposing a mere possibility to our best information; and it is of peculiar importance to observe, that our histories not only record the gradual advances of mankind, from comparative ignorance and barbarism to science and civilization; but carry us back to the time, when most of the arts of life were in their infancy; when their progress and improvement had been so small, that they could not be supposed older than they are represented. Profane history does not furnish an example of such progress in any art, as is incompatible with the date, which our scriptures assign for the origin of mankind.

The similarity of languages to each other; their resemblance in their alphabets, in the numbers and forms of their characters, and in all the technical detail of grammar and construction, seems presumptive evidence, that all were derived from one common origin: and where shall we look for this origin, but in the divine communications? It is readily allowed, that this similarity is
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not sufficiently striking and universal, to be considered as conclusive testimony, that all have sprung from the same root. But when we reflect, through how many nations and how many ages they have been transmitted; how frequently they have been mixed or divided; in what imperfect records they have been preserved; how often and how incorrectly they have been copied; how continually the fashionable character in every country is new-modelled; and by how many arts and accidents all are improved, corrupted, or defaced; we shall not be disposed to regard even a distant resemblance as of no weight or value; and we are here contending for presumptive, not positive, proof; for probability, not demonstration. To this too we must add, that no nation can produce any indisputable claim to the invention of letters; and that all written language can be traced with historical probability to the same original; to the language of the people, to whom our scriptures assure us, the Deity vouchsafed his first and greatest communications.

The supposition that language is of divine original will be further supported by considering, how probable it is, that the first series of articulate sounds must have been learned by instruction or inspiration from heaven. It has been plausibly maintained, that we could not even think and reflect without a language. Words pass in the mind as the representatives of things; at least of things not seen; and without words therefore, if we were able to reason at all, it could only be on a small number of objects, and to a very limited extent. Man could hardly be considered as rational. But not to entangle ourselves in metaphysical subtleties; let us consider that there is no existing language, known to be the language of nature; and that all articulate sounds were formed by art, and are acquired by imitation. Each generation of men learned their language from those that went immediately before them; and pursue the idea backwards, as far as we please, we must come at last to him who spoke it first; and how he attained it, will then be a question, to which no rational answer can be given; but that he received
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it, with other endowments, from the bounty of his Creator.

If, again, language be a human invention; it may be asked, in what age and in what country was it invented? In every nation, from the earliest period to which either their own or foreign history will carry us, we find a language existing and established; and that, not as a wonder or a novelty; not as a recent discovery of their own; or as a recent importation from any other country; but as having been always in their possession; of which they know not the source or the beginning. Of the formation, or the improvement, of a particular alphabet we have heard; but no history has recorded, and but a few daring theorists have attempted to maintain, that there ever was a time, when men did not utter articulate sounds; or when they first began to utter them.

Let it be considered again how improbable it is, that man in a savage state should contrive and complete so ingenious and complicated a device as language. When men possessed hardly any means of deliberation,
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of communicating their sentiments to each other; supposing that they once existed in such a state; how were they to agree upon the use and meaning of arbitrary signs and sounds? and what length of time would have been sufficient to settle and fix a language? Without the use of language, how was a language to be formed?

Not only the difficulty of the invention, however, but its excellence and utility also, are presumptive evidence that it is of divine original. It is very rationally supposed, that when the Creator gave reason to man, he would instruct him in the art, from which the gift acquires its greatest value; that when he granted to him so many endowments, above those granted to other animals, he would not omit that, by which his superiority is best asserted and maintained; that when he formed him for society*, he would

* As in these lectures I every where take it for granted, or assume it as an acknowledged truth; and argue from it as such; that man was by his Creator intended and fitted for society; I shall state once for all, as concisely as possible, the principal reasons on which the assumption is founded;

would bestow that, without which society hardly could subsist. Augustus confessed that he could not add to his own language one new word; and Hobbes admits, that God instructed Adam in the use of speech. Thus do we every where arrive at the same conclusion; the probability of divine instruction, or divine revelation; that the first man was enabled, as represented in our scriptures, not only to call every creature by its appropriate appellation; but to express, and to convey to his posterity, the knowledge which he had received from his Creator.

founded; and which appear to me equally obvious and unanswerable.

1. The mutual attachment of the sexes; which immediately constitutes society. 2. The affection of parents for their offspring; which tends so strongly to continue it. 3. The great and lasting necessity of assistance to infants; without which they must all inevitably perish. 4. The universal proneness to imitation in children. 5. Their capacity of improvement by instruction and example. 6. The use of language; by which mutual information is communicated with such facility and effect. 7. The helplessness and probable misery of solitude. 8. All the advantages of civilization. 9. All the benefits of mutual assistance; and all the acquisitions of combined efforts. 10. All the social affections and social virtues. 11. And almost all the qualities and propensities of our nature.

7. Another argument for the probability of revelation may be found, in the universal belief of the divine interference in human affairs; of the reality of miracles and of prophecy. If the course of nature exhibit no remarkable deviation from her own laws; if human life furnish no instances of future events foretold at an immense distance of time and place; of predictions delivered and accomplished without fraud or collusion; whence shall we suppose mankind derived their notions and their belief of things so improbable and inexplicable? How shall we account for the omens and oracles of antiquity? for the judicial astrology of more modern times? for the credulity of the populace respecting the visible agency of superior beings, and the prophetic impostors of the present day? If this be ascribed to the contrivances of the interested and the artful on one hand, and on the other, to the love of the marvellous in the weak and illiterate; it is sufficient to observe, that this accounts only for its use at present, not for its original production; that impostors do not advance pretensions irreconcilable to all that was known before; but in order to obtain the easier credit,

credit, always imitate what once really existed, or was supposed to exist; and that the weak and ignorant are fond of the marvellous, only while they believe at least its possibility. The opinion in question is found in the earliest records of every nation; and till a more probable origin can be assigned for ideas equally extraordinary and universal, let us be allowed to ascribe them to tradition from our primitive ancestors; or to some imperfect acquaintance with the transactions and the history of revelation. Divine truth has been the most copious source of fable.

It has indeed been often urged, that the pretensions to preternatural authority, to miracles and to divination, in Moses and the prophets themselves, are such only, or nearly such, as have been advanced in almost all ages and nations; and may therefore most reasonably be ranked with other fabulous and unfounded claims. Imposture, it cannot be denied, has been so frequently and boldly attempted, that our minds may naturally become cautious and suspicious; and that it will require an effort of the understanding, which a superficial enquirer may not be disposed

posed to make, to suppose that there can be truth and authenticity, at the bottom of the general mass of forgery and fiction. Not to insist at present, however, on the superiority of the claims of the prophets of our scriptures; it seems not unreasonable to infer, from the frequency of these pretensions, that divine interposition, miracles and prophecy once were real. Impostors were not likely to invent such a system; but very likely to adopt and convert it to their own advantage. The similiarity in such a number of copies tends to prove their descent from the same original; and this original will not easily be found, but in the truths and facts of revelation and scripture. Though several erroneous theories of the solar system have been published and believed; the theory of Newton is not therefore erroneous like the rest. Investigation proves it to be true.

8. In another opinion, at no great distance from that which we have just considered, may be found perhaps a further probability of divine revelation; in the opinion, which most nations have entertained of their own origin, and of the origin of authority among them. It is well known that the idle

vanity of individuals in magnifying the rank, fortune, and virtues of their families, extends in its full force to the conduct of nations: and that neither the one nor the other, in their endeavours to gratify the passion, will take much pains to discover truth; or to adhere to it when known. It has been supposed to be from this motive alone, that so many nations, and some distinguished individuals, have persuaded themselves, or at least endeavoured to persuade others, that they were originally descended from their gods; that their ancestors, according to their respective superstitions, were the sons of Jupiter; the descendants of the great spirit; or the children of the sun. But let the point be thoroughly investigated, and this puerile vanity will by no means appear, under all the circumstances of the case, a sufficient cause for the effects it is supposed to have produced. Nations could not have affected to be the descendants of their gods, till themselves and others believed that such gods existed; and unless they were taught it, whence shall we suppose they obtained the notion, that immortal beings were the parents of a mortal offspring; that the sons
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of gods were only men. But there is no difficulty in the case, if we admit that they retained some imperfect tradition of the truth; of the creation of our first parents by the Almighty; that God had *made man in his own image.*

That this was the true source of the opinion in question receives material confirmation from what may almost be considered as one of its branches; the opinion entertained by most nations of the origin of civil power. Almost every where we find that power has been derived from patriarchal authority, and patriarchal authority from the supposed appointment of heaven. Whatever may be maintained or determined respecting the actual origin, or the genuine rights, of civil government; it appears to be true in point of fact, that religion and law have generally been united; something of the usual alliance between church and state every where established: the latter supporting, by the real or pretended sanction of the former, sometimes indeed its particular forms; but more frequently and more reasonably its general claim to authority; its right to demand

mand the submission and obedience of individuals; to enforce whatever promises effectually to preserve the tranquillity and advantages of social life. This union is found too in nations not sufficiently improved to enter into deep and subtle contrivances, for the purposes of policy and power. To what then shall this be ascribed, but to tradition and imitation of what our scriptures teach us to believe; of the protection and instruction bestowed by the Creator upon the earliest generations of mankind; and in a peculiar manner exerted afterwards in the theocracy of the Jews.

9. It is probable again that a revelation from heaven is the original source of all religion; because while nations the least removed from what has been called a state of nature, the least advanced in arts and sciences, are found to possess a religion; it is hardly credible they should have invented it for themselves. Nations, that subsist by the chase, have little leisure, and appear to have as little inclination, for speculative studies. They are wholly engaged in providing for the day that is passing over them;

in guarding their own safety, or annoying an enemy; and when this is effected, their only wish is feasting or repose. Were the savage to speculate, he must conclude; but the probability is, that he does not speculate at all. Curiosity is the offspring of a cultivated mind; and its gratification, the employment of ease and leisure. When we, who are accustomed to reflection, behold any extraordinary work; our thoughts make an immediate transition to the means, by which it must have been performed: from contemplating the effect, we naturally proceed to consider the cause. But the faculties of the savage seem dormant by disuse; and are seldom exerted but at the call of imperious necessity. If not pressed by hunger, or alarmed by his enemy, he gazes with the same stupid indifference on the stream that flows at his feet, or the mountain that rises to the clouds; on the growth of a vegetable, or the revolutions of the sun. "In him reason differs little from the improvident instinct of animals, or the thoughtless levity of children." He will cut down the tree, to obtain the fruit of the present year, without any consideration how
future

future years are to be supplied. At the approach of summer he will suffer his hut to decay, or to be destroyed; without once reflecting how soon winter must return; nor do his own repeated experience and sufferings render him wiser or more provident. If then savages are thus thoughtless, where their own necessities should compel them to think; if their minds will reason so little, on what is daily forced upon their senses; it will not be expected, they should either be able or inclined to engage in any curious speculations on the distinctions of right and wrong; on the rules and motives of virtue and vice. Still less can it be supposed, that they should have been so attentive to the operations of nature, as to have drawn from them any inferences respecting the existence and attributes of a Creator; and least of all, that they should have proceeded to proofs of the moral government of God; and the belief of rewards and punishments dispensed by him, here or hereafter, according to their merits or their crimes.

10. Still, however, our best accounts assure us, that the savages are not without

some imperfect notions on these difficult and important points. To the universality of these notions, indeed, exceptions, among some of the most barbarous nations, have been supposed to be found. But they are so few in number, and so doubtful as to their reality, that they do not seem sufficient to break the chain of general argument, or to affect the general conclusion. It has indeed, on the contrary, been maintained, that the belief of a Supreme Being is so universal, it must be natural and innate; impressed upon the human mind by him who formed the mind itself; and the consent of all nations has been immemorially urged, as a proof of the existence of a Creator and a God. The great question is, whence did those, who have a religion, obtain it? and the most probable answer is, from tradition and revelation. That it was so obtained is probable, not only because we cannot well conceive from what other source it could be drawn; but because it still exhibits some vestiges of its divine original. The savages have ceremonies, of which they do not appear to know any rational use or meaning; and doctrines, of which they cannot assign the

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the author or the proof; and it should seem therefore, that they are continued not so much from choice, as from custom; not from conviction, but authority. The probability is, that their religion reached its present form, not by progression, but by degeneracy; that they have not improved, but corrupted it; that it was brought along with them from their parent state; and, for want of records, writing and literature, has been debased by such interpretations, changes, and additions, as would naturally be made by ignorance, negligence, or superstition.

A yet stronger proof, because a stronger vestige, of the true origin of the religions of savage nations, is to be found in the resemblance they bear to each other, and even to the truths of our scriptures. A similarity in the ordinary occupations of life between nations in similar circumstances, might be supposed not to arise from any communication between them; but to be the natural effect of their situation. The same wants are every where supplied much in the same way; and the same objects and passions will produce every where much the same senti-

ments and exertions. The fisherman, whether on the Indus or the Ohio, must have recourse to similar expedients in pursuit of his prey; and the hunter of the new world must subsist, much in the same manner as the hunter of the antient continent. But if in opinions remote from objects of sense, and little connected with the acquisition of subsistence; if in customs of arbitrary institution, and not directly suggested by the passions; if in these we find any considerable resemblance; it may fairly be presumed, that they are derived either the one from the other, or both from some common origin. And such resemblance appears to be discernible in the religious tenets and religious ceremonies of almost all ages and nations, whether barbarous or civilized; whether preserved in the records of antient history, or discovered by the researches of our own times. It has been traced between the doctrines of Zoroaster, and the institutions of Moses; between the sages of Greece, and the savages of America; between the Druids of our own island, and the Bramins of Indostan. Almost all nations entertain the notion of a Supreme Being; not only the
maker,

maker, but the governor of the universe; who approves and will reward merit, and condemns and will punish crimes; who, when offended, may be appeased, and his favour recovered, by certain acts of worship, penitence, and compensation. Almost all again, however distant from each other in situation or science, have supposed the Supreme Being to have his train of ministering spirits; by whose agency not only his own dignity is supported, and his commands in general performed; but by whom he holds an intercourse with mankind; by whom he has revealed his will, and inflicts his chastisements, or bestows his blessings. They have all too some idea that they shall not be annihilated by death; but removed to some more durable state of existence; in which they shall enjoy endless peace and happiness, if their conduct here shall be found to have deserved it. Whether all nations entertain the idea and the belief of a Supreme Being, has certainly been questioned; but it is asserted without reserve, that all expect the immortality of the soul. This opinion, it is said, has been found in every country, from the banks of the Ganges to the shores of the

Atlantic, and from the coasts of Labrador to the straits of Magellan. If then it be improbable that any nation of barbarians should invent a religion for themselves; it is still more improbable that each such nation should have invented nearly the same; that all their different systems should bear in their principal features such a resemblance to one another; that we cannot forbear to consider them as the descendants of some common ancestor; as collateral streams from the same parent source.

11. We must not, however, and we need not, rest the decision of the question on the religious institutions of savages alone. To them it may be justly objected; that our accounts are imperfect and obscure; and our inferences from them consequently not certain or conclusive. But if we proceed to examine those of nations more civilized and improved; whose history is more authentic, and whose faith and worship are more intelligible; we shall find in them still stronger marks of a divine revelation; opinions still less remote from the doctrines of our scriptures. In most of their systems of religion
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are found traces of a chaos and a creation; of the propagation of the human race from a small number, or a single pair; of a destruction by a deluge; and of the restoration of mankind by a family that escaped the general calamity. In all are found accounts, that the Deity or his ministers have condescended to hold intercourse with men; that himself or his agents have instructed them, as well in the arts of procuring subsistence, as in the rules and principles of the moral and social duties. This is the basis of the religion of the Tartars at this day: And “in the modern system of the Japanese,” says Thunberg, “we discover the offspring of human wit; whilst their antient system exhibits evident traces of the divine law of Moses.”

Another circumstance of material importance in confirmation of our hypothesis is the universality of sacrifice. We have not from nature or reason any grounds to imagine, that we can render ourselves acceptable to the Deity, by taking away the life we did not give, and cannot restore; and still less to suppose, that *the blood of bulls and of goats can take away sin*. Yet of every religion, known

known before Christianity, did sacrifice make a principal part; and that too with the same design; to engage the favour of their gods towards some enterprize they meditated; or their pardon for some offence they had committed. And to what can a rite so universal and inexplicable be imputed, but to the divine appointment at first, and afterwards to tradition and imitation. It is obviously fair to ascribe that to a revelation from heaven, which cannot reasonably or plausibly be ascribed to any other cause.

12. If we ascend to the theology of Greece and Rome, we shall find the traces of this revelation still less equivocal, than in the doctrines of nations less refined; discoloured indeed by a mixture of oriental mysteries, disguised by the fanciful decorations of fable, and debased by the absurdities of superstition; but still too numerous to be overlooked, and too strong to be mistaken. Whence indeed, but from revelation, could they obtain opinions so analogous to it, as are occasionally found in their writings, respecting a creation and a providence, the rules of morality, the immortality of the soul,

soul, and a future state of retribution. Whence indeed, but from the oracles of truth, could they have borrowed those numerous imitations of it, which are still discernible in their mythology. Not to insist on any obscure and disputable points of resemblance; not to dwell on such analogies, as have been formed, between the characters of Noah and of Saturn; or between the transactions of Moses and of Bacchus; let a comparison be made between the innocence and fall of man in scripture, and the heathen degeneracy from the golden to the iron age; between the sacrifice of Isaac and of Iphigenia; between the deluges of Noah and of Deucalion; and between many other points of sacred history and classical fable; and little doubt will remain, but the latter were borrowed from the former. The possibilities of fiction are infinite: and it seems therefore not credible that coincidences so extraordinary, in instances so numerous, should happen from accident only; that truth in Asia should agree with fiction in Greece; or that both should be the independent offspring of imagination alone.

That

That Plato was greatly indebted to the scriptures or the traditions of the Jews, very considerable, and perhaps satisfactory, evidence may be traced in the writings of Plato himself. He not only expresses, on many occasions, sentiments the most worthy of the Deity, and the most nearly resembling those of holy writ; but he repeatedly acknowledges, what appears to be the fact, that these sentiments were not the discoveries of his own understanding; that he derived them from what he calls plausible fables, antient records, or sacred tradition*. Let us indeed but suppose for a moment that Plato and the other heathen philosophers were indebted, for their best conceptions of the divine nature, and their best principles and precepts of morality, to the traditional re-

* Passages to this effect occur in the Phædon, the Defence of Socrates, the Phædrus, Georgias, Philebus, and indeed in almost every part of his works. And as these passages shew that he borrowed his theological tenets somewhere, Menagius in his very learned notes on Diogenes Laertius, lib. 3. has shewn what historical probability there is, or rather what historical evidence remains, that he borrowed them from the Hebrews. A valuable note to the same purpose may be seen in *Leland's advantage and necessity of the Christian Revelation*. Vol. I. p. 403.

mains of an original and primeval revelation, or to what they had collected from some imperfect acquaintance with the Jewish scriptures; and we shall immediately perceive that the supposition will remove some material difficulties, and carry in itself considerable marks of probability. Their best sentiments on these important points are often abruptly introduced, and as abruptly quitted; they do not reason upon them with that consistency, which is generally to be traced in the mind's own discoveries; nor pursue them through all their natural consequences. They do not state the process of investigation by which they were obtained; which it is always practicable to do in our own acquisitions; and for their opinions, they often give an authority instead of a proof. Each has founded his system of ethics, on the best basis his understanding could suggest; supported it by the best sanctions, his observation and knowledge could supply; and explained it in detail, as best corresponded with his own hypothesis. Some of their maxims of prudence, or precepts of morality, they have themselves ascribed to their oracles or gods; and by some moderns they have been supposed,

posed; either to have discovered truths worthy of Christianity; or to have been peculiarly endowed or inspired, to prevent the total loss of religion in the gentile world. But suppose a part of the divine communications to have been lost, as well as the true origin of what remained; and we shall no longer wonder that their particular rules of morality are so excellent, yet the system so imperfect; that where the system is best, the basis is so visionary, or the sanctions so insufficient; or that in their theology, occasional sublimity and purity are mixed with at least an equal portion of absurdity and corruption. The plausibility of this supposition is no slight recommendation of it; and its consistency with itself, and with many acknowledged facts, is presumptive evidence of its truth.

The general opinion has been, that Plato was indebted for much of his philosophy to the Egyptians; and Egypt has usually been considered as the country, where science first dawned upon mankind; where were first invented many of the most useful arts of life. But allowing her full credit for her

ingenuity

ingenuity and improvements in art and science, it will not be easy to establish her claim to pre-eminence in theology. If her sentiments in religion may be determined by her idolatry, her doctrines by her worship, they were at a wide distance from refinement, sublimity, or truth. Her Hieroglyphics have not yet been proved to be much more valuable, than the *picture-writing* of the humbler inhabitants of Mexico; and they are perhaps allowed to be the more profound, in proportion as they are less understood.

But whatever was the nature or the extent of the celebrated wisdom of Egypt, it does not appear to have been originally her own. We are informed, upon authority*, which there is no reason to question, that while Abraham resided at the court of Pharaoh, he taught astronomy to the Egyptians; and it seems still more reasonable to suppose, that he would teach them the rudiments of true theology; that by his instructions or his devotions, he would communicate some

* Euseb. Præp. Evang.

knowledge of the proper object of worship. From the time too that the Israelites were in captivity among them, they kept up a continual intercourse with Judea; and could therefore be at no loss for whatever they chose to adopt from the religious doctrines of the Jewish nation. With all her obligations, again, Greece was not indebted to Egypt for her alphabet, but to the Phenicians; and they to the Jews. With great appearance of truth too, the honour of giving birth to science has been claimed by modern enquirers for Indostan; as more immediately the pupil of revelation, and the instructor of Egypt herself. The Bramins, it is true, claim an antiquity for their theology, much superior to that of the Jewish law. But besides that this claim has been not only controverted, but generally exploded; it is much more probable in itself, that authenticity should be found in the dignified simplicity of scripture, than in the mystic fables of the Bramins; that they should have enlarged and disfigured the precepts or the narratives of Moses; than that he should have abridged and simplified their extravagant allegories, to the semblance and consistency of truth.

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But even supposing them to have established their pretensions to an antiquity, equal or superior to that of the Jewish lawgiver; still there were, according to our scriptures, other sources of revelation, from whence their theology might be drawn. It was one reason, we may suppose, for exempting the chosen family from the general calamity of the deluge; that they might preserve such knowledge of their Creator, of his providence, and his commands, as had already been revealed; and this knowledge would afterwards naturally be dispersed, with the dispersion of the sons of Noah; and preserved in every country, from the time the country itself was peopled. To this were added from time to time the divine communications to the patriarchs and prophets; and these, no doubt, carried by migration or tradition to the neighbouring nations; and whether justly or erroneously understood, however corrupted or enlarged, by imagination, ignorance, or artifice, in some degree incorporated with what was already the national creed. In transactions so antient, when letters were not generally known, or not in general use, we cannot expect histo-

rical documents to be either very numerous or very exact: but there seems to be sufficient evidence, when supported by the probability of the hypothesis itself, to confirm the general outline of the statement that has been made; to render it credible, that all the nations of the earth have been indebted, for the first principles of their theology, to the history, the traditions, or the scriptures of those, *unto whom were committed the oracles of God.* If it appear in any degree probable, that a divine revelation was ever given to mankind; it seems equally probable, that it was given in the time and manner, in which the sacred volumes have announced it. The hypothesis that has been maintained, and the records of holy writ may be allowed by their consistency, without the charge of arguing in a circle, to give and to receive mutual support and confirmation.

To the different considerations, that have been brought forward, different men, no doubt, will allow very different degrees of weight and importance. They are to be viewed, however, not singly, but collectively; not in their separate, but united,

force. The opinion is maintained; because circumstances so numerous, in the essential attributes of the Deity, and in the appearances of nature, in the civil and religious institutions, and in the history and situation of mankind, either bear positive testimony in its favour, or are reconcileable to it, and best accounted for on the supposition of its truth. A thousand lines of probability all terminate in the same point: evidence may be traced upwards by a thousand channels to the same general source. We have from every quarter, from almost every thing within or without us, reasons to be convinced, that the Creator has revealed his will to mankind; and that our scriptures are, what they profess to be, the word of God*.

* The following argument was originally intended to make a part of the lecture. But as it seemed to interrupt the general train of reasoning, it is subjoined in the form of a note. It cannot be too often repeated.

The probability that God has revealed his will to mankind, and that this revelation is contained in our scriptures, may be yet further supported by the well-known argument, from the ancient history and present circumstances of the Jewish nation; and especially from the several prophecies that announced their dispersion; and the

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the remarkable and continued accomplishment of them, through the lapse of so many centuries. With the direct evidence of Christianity; and therefore with the subject of prophecy in general, it has already been declared, the present lecture is not immediately concerned: nor is it intended to enter into any critical enquiry, which of the predictions in question were wholly or partially fulfilled, in the earlier wars or captivities of the Jews; in the famines or the sieges they suffered at Jerusalem. But from their conduct and situation an argument has been drawn, in favour of the truth of Christianity, depending so much upon transactions at this day passing in the world, and so open to general and even superficial observation; that it seems well entitled to a place amongst such probabilities, as have already been adduced. It is an argument too so forcible and conclusive in itself, that, how frequently so ever it may have been urged already, it cannot be omitted without injustice to the cause, which it is so well calculated to support.

To the history and fortunes of the Jews, nothing parallel can be pointed out in the annals of mankind. Individuals of the nation are found in almost every inhabited portion of the globe; yet in none have they any permanent establishment. They are mixed with every civilized society; yet of none do they form any essential part. They are not admitted to a share in any public counsel; nor in the authority of any government. They are in every country despised and insulted; and in most they have been at different times persecuted and plundered. Even riches have not procured for them, what they seldom fail to procure for other men, power, influence, or respect. In strict conformity to the prophecy, *the Lord hath scattered.*

*scattered them among all people, and from one end of the earth even unto the other**; and they are become an *astonishment, a proverb, and a bye-word amongst all nations, whither the Lord hath led them* †. Yet to this reproach they do not seem solicitous to put an end: they have not made any vigorous efforts to escape from it. The discovery of the western continent, and its extensive and uncultivated wastes, seemed to offer them both opportunity and encouragement to fly from the insults they endure; to establish themselves under their own government and laws; and once more to assume a rank in the catalogue of nations. But this encouragement, for whatever reason, they have neglected: this opportunity they have not embraced.

Nor is it the least remarkable circumstance in their story; that under the pressure of all these difficulties; and in opposition to the fate of the fugitives from all other countries; they still continue a distinct and separate people. When the natives of other regions have been dispersed by flight or captivities, they have generally soon been mingled and incorporated with any nation, in which they had sought a refuge; and their own name and peculiarities quickly forgotten. Of the once famed inhabitants of Babylon or Carthage not a vestige can now be traced. But the Jews *are not cast away nor utterly destroyed* †. Amidst the revolutions, and even the ruins, of many countries, to which they have fled for refuge, they have preserved themselves and their singularities of character and conduct, almost as unchanged, as if they were still in possession of *their own place and nation*. These circumstances surely may, without superstition or pre-

* Deut. xxviii. 64.

† Deut. xxviii. 37.

‡ Levit. xxvi. 44.

sumption, be considered as miraculous; as bearing their own evidence of the immediate direction of the Almighty.

It has indeed been supposed that they may be reasonably and fairly accounted for, from political and moral causes alone; from the unfocial policy and manners of the Jews; from their pertinacious adherence to the ordinances of their law, in the peculiarities of their religious ceremonies; in the distinctions of their food; and in their rejection of marriage and alliance with the individuals of other nations. This pertinacious adherence too, it is observed, is confirmed and continued, both by the insults they receive on one hand, and by the hopes they entertain, on the other, of being one day restored to the possession of their own city, and to a peculiar share of the divine favour. But whatever human reasons may be assigned for the facts themselves; their coincidence with the prophecies can be satisfactorily accounted for on one principle alone. The Jews in their present state exhibit a standing monument, not only of the justice and power of God; but of the moral government of the world by his providence; and of the truth of that revelation, which our Scriptures have recorded.

SERMON IV.

THE DOCTRINES AND PRECEPTS OF THE
CHRISTIAN REVELATION FAVOURABLE
TO THE ENJOYMENTS OF THE PRESENT
LIFE.

I TIM. IV. 8.

*Godliness is profitable unto all things; having
promise of the life that now is, and of that
which is to come.*

THE principal object, which almost every religion has professed to pursue, has been to secure the happiness of mankind in a life to come; as the consequence, indeed, and the reward of obedience to its laws in their present state. But besides the prospect of future felicity, each has generally offered to its followers the additional encouragement of immediate advantages and enjoyments. To men of virtue and piety have been promised peace of mind and temporal prosperity; pri-

vate comfort and public tranquillity; the favour and blessing of their creator, as the present effect of their duty to their fellow-creatures.

In estimating the merits, therefore, of rival religions; in deciding on their respective claims to a divine origin and divine authority, one fair ground of judging will be;—with what degree of wisdom each appears to be adapted to its own purposes, and to the present circumstances and character of man. According to our best notions of the attributes of the Deity, that religion is probably derived from him, of which the general tendency is to produce humanity and benevolence; and of which the particular duties are immediately and in themselves beneficial; which co-operates with the best qualities of the individual, and the best laws of government, in the promotion of personal and national virtue and happiness. Upon this principle it is that, in addition to the probabilities stated on a former occasion, we assert the suitability of the Christian revelation to the present condition of mankind, as another testimony of its authenticity.

This consideration, it is obvious, like those to which we have just alluded, amounts not to direct, but only to presumptive proof; it is the criterion, not of certainty, but of credibility. This evidence, however, whatever be its force, we claim with confidence for the religion we profess: we maintain that; independently of its principal purpose, our attaining *to the life and immortality, which it has brought to light*; we shall also by obedience to its laws, have the fairest chance for temporal enjoyments; that, according to the language of the apostle, *Godliness is profitable unto all things; having the promise of the life that now is, as well as of that which is to come.*

This argument, however, in favour of our religion, will not be allowed us without a contest. For the supposed enmity of Christianity to many of our pleasures; its pretended unfitness for the present state of human nature and human society, is often considered as an objection to its credibility; as a strong presumption, that it could not proceed from the same Creator; who implanted the propensities, which it contradicts
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and condemns. It is true that this objection rather operates on the minds of individuals, as a discouragement to religion, or as a subject of complaint against it, than is maintained as the doctrine of any particular description of unbelievers; and that its influence does not depend so much on its own native force, as on its giving weight and efficacy to others. It is true also, that many of those, who are influenced by it, mistake the rites of religious worship, or the laws of an ecclesiastical establishment, for the essential doctrines of the religion itself; and that they do not so much oppose revelation by argument, as reject it without examination. But if the objection is not much insisted on in the disquisitions of the philosopher; it is continually asserted by men of the world; if it be not entitled to much attention for its strength or ingenuity; it rises into importance by its mischievous effects on morality.

That we may not wander in too wide a field of discussion, it will be necessary to reduce the objection in some measure to distinct propositions; and to confine ourselves

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to a few of the leading articles, of which it appears to consist.

Men of the world complain, for instance, that our religion, or at least our ecclesiastical establishment, by its appointment of days of fasting and mortification, prescribes restrictions at once useless in themselves, and painful in the performance; sometimes injurious to health; and not likely to render us acceptable to God; as they teach us only to reject his bounty and his blessings. They complain again, that our religion is hostile to many of the general and necessary arts of trade; to those arts by which the merchant may most speedily attain to wealth, distinction, and enjoyment. They complain that by its prohibitions of resentment and revenge, it seems not only to preclude in many cases the right of self-defence; but to destroy that honour and spirit, which constitute or secure the true character and dignity of man. They complain lastly in general, that it enjoins us to restrain or to extirpate those appetites, which it were happiness to indulge; and that it would introduce such a melancholy
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and gloomy habit of mind; such dejection and terror of spirit; as must not only destroy all the pleasures of life; but unfit us for the discharge of many of its duties.

1. With respect to fasting, as a religious duty, it has been maintained; that neither our Saviour nor his apostles have any where directly enjoined it. But to this it may be replied; that the omission of such injunction seems to have arisen only from their having supposed injunction unnecessary for a practice, which they found already established in the religion of the Jews; and in that religion, what they did not repeal, they confirmed. They had no occasion to command what was already received; and they have by their language and their actions, not only recognised and countenanced the rite, but given directions for its decent and devout performance. Under this sanction it is, that our church appoints her days of fasting and humiliation; and we conceive that what the church has appointed, the propriety of the duty itself will confirm.

We do not suppose that voluntary submission to pain has any merit; but where it is necessary to the performance of our duty: we do not suppose that a temporary change of food, or a temporary abstinence from it, can of itself recommend us to the favour of God. But our days of fasting are appointed as seasons for thought, meditation, and prayer. Cool reflection is the most irresistible enemy of sin. To think is generally all we want, to make us believe what we ought, and practise what we believe. But it is only when pleasure and its allurements are suspended; when company and business are at a distance, that the mind will turn inward upon itself; and with due care and severity examine its own condition, opinions, and principles. When the appetites are not pampered, the passions are not inflamed. It is at such seasons, therefore, that we shall be best able to form just sentiments and good resolutions; to give truth and religion such ascendancy in the mind, that they may afterwards become the guide of our actions, amidst the tumults and temptations of the world.

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By occasionally denying indulgence to our appetites; instead of being enslaved and corrupted by our senses; we shall bring them under an easy and habitual subjection to our understanding. We shall indeed obtain the double advantage; of being able to command our passions, whenever temptation would surprize us; and to endure, without inconvenience or impatience, those occasional severities, to which our duty or our interest may expose us.

Occasional fasting may be further recommended, as conducive to health. Almost every man, not restrained by his situation and circumstances, consumes a much larger proportion of food, than nature and necessity require: and as nothing more certainly and rapidly impairs the constitution, than habitual repletion and excess; for the preservation or recovery of it, nothing can be more suitable or effectual, than occasional and seasonable abstinence. Our duty and our interest are generally united. What is so useful in a moral view, and enjoined chiefly for moral purposes; contributes at the same time to the preservation of our strength

strength and faculties ; to the length and the enjoyment of life*.

Fasting and humiliation, again, may with propriety be employed, as expressions of penitence ; when we have abused the gifts of providence by intemperance and excess. This indeed seems natural to the human mind. It has in almost all ages and nations been customary for religious and pious men to express their sorrow for intemperance, by denying themselves ordinary indulgence ; and to endeavour, as well to recover, by voluntary mortification, the purity they were supposed to have lost ; as to avert the displeasure of heaven, by inflicting such an appropriate punishment upon themselves.

In the observance of a fast, prayer and confession always make a part. The use

* Occasional general fasts might be recommended as a political institution : for they might produce material benefits to a nation ; by diminishing the consumption of animal food. But this either has no connection with religion and morality, and therefore does not apply to the present purpose ; or religion must be made the pretext for policy ; a mode of proceeding surely not entitled to be recommended for imitation.

and importance of prayer shall hereafter be examined : and with respect to the confession of our offences ; it is universally allowed to have a powerful tendency to rectify our principles and conduct. While we enumerate our transgressions, the mind naturally dwells upon their guilt and danger ; we make a new covenant of obedience with ourselves and with our God ; and we cannot avoid reflecting that repentance without reformation is but *the form of godliness without the power* ; and must necessarily offend him, *from whom no secrets are hid.*

The appointment and the regulation of stated seasons for fasting and humiliation have formed a part of the ritual of almost every religion of the known world : and this surely is no contemptible evidence of their use and propriety. Those indeed, who maintain that all religion had its origin in divine revelation, will consider the universality of this rite, only as one proof more in support of their hypothesis. But to those by whom that hypothesis is not admitted, the existence of the practice in such distant parts and distant periods of the world, must
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be an unanswerable argument ; if not of the utility of the rite itself ; at least of the general opinion in its favour.

To fasting and humiliation it is not only customary but reasonable to have recourse, in cases of severe affliction ; whether felt or feared, whether personal or national. As we believe these visitations of providence to be either trials of our obedience, or inflictions for our offences ; it is natural to humble ourselves before him ; to entreat he will either alleviate or avert them. He alone has power and authority to soften the severity of our probation or our punishment. And whatever may be urged respecting the immutable nature, or the immutable justice, of the Deity ; we still maintain that human contrition must be shewn by some human expression of it ; and that every idea of a moral governour includes the idea of the right and the inclination to pardon penitent offenders. All civilized nations have supposed their gods to be offended with their crimes ; but placable by repentance ; and Christians, in particular, are taught to believe, that for

all offences, of which they truly repent, atonement has been made.

With what frequency days of public or private fasting and humiliation shall be appointed; and with what peculiar solemnities they shall be observed; must be determined by the judgment and the circumstances of individuals or of nations. Neither the number of such seasons, nor any appropriate forms of devotion, have been prescribed by divine revelation. These acts of piety, like most other external ceremonies of religion, are left to be fixed and observed, as every man's own conscience may suggest, as public authority may direct, or the visitations of providence may seem to require.

This discipline then of our church, this appointment of seasons of fasting and humiliation, is neither a useless mortification to ourselves, nor an object of just ridicule or censure to our enemies. But it is a wise and salutary institution; calculated to aid occasional penitence, or habitual piety; to improve the knowledge of our duty; and to
impress

impress upon our minds its importance and obligations*.

2. The second complaint of worldly-minded men against the Christian revelation is, that the strict morality, which it requires, is incompatible with success in commercial transactions: and they too often on that account disbelieve or disregard it. In order to enhance the profits of trade, and the sooner

* As these arguments have been urged, as much as might be, independently of divine revelation, and are intended to apply to the propriety of fasting in general, whether public or private, stated or occasional, it may be proper to produce here authorities for each from scripture. For instances of public fasts, see Judg. xx. 26. and Jonah iii. 5. For instances of private fasting, see Psalm lxix. 10. and Dan. ix. 3. For the stated fast, see Levit. xxiii. 26. and Numb. xxix. 7. And for the occasional, see Joel ii. 12. and 1 Sam. vii. 5. In the new testament the practice is so far from being discountenanced; that our Saviour prepared himself for his ministry by a fast of forty days; and has given directions for the due observance of fasts in general, in opposition to the ostentation and hypocrisy of the Jews, Matt. vi. 16. It is also recognised again, and indeed enjoined, Matt. ix. 14, and in the corresponding passages, Mark ii. 18. and Luke v. 33. It appears also to have been the regular practice of the Apostles and first converts to Christianity, Acts xiii. 2, and xiv. 23.

to obtain opulence and distinction, many artifices are employed by them, which each individual considers as made necessary to himself by the general practice; but which he knows religion condemns. With a view therefore to quiet his conscience without relinquishing his gains; to indulge his favourite pursuit, without forfeiting his own approbation; each adopts such an expedient as best suits the temper of his mind, or the circumstances of his life. One man divests himself of all regard to revelation and its laws; another, who finds that impossible, trusts that some allowance will be made for the necessities of his situation; and a third flies to those false and fatal teachers of religion; who would separate morality from piety, and persuade us that faith alone is sufficient for salvation. We shall endeavour to convince such men, that these artifices are unjustifiable on the principles of right reason, as well as condemned by divine revelation; to reconcile them to the Christian religion, as the teacher of what is most beneficial, as well as what is most upright; as containing rules of morality, which, instead of being

an objection to it, constitute one of its strongest recommendations.

Should it, however, not be satisfactorily proved from reason alone, that the artifices of the trader are immoral and pernicious; let him not triumph in his victory, or his practice; for we still consider revelation as the final and decisive authority; and only wave it for the present, in order to expose his error on his own ground; on principles which he cannot so easily dispute.

One violation of integrity, which the trader too often allows himself to practise without scruple, is that recommendation of his merchandise, which he knows it does not deserve; the extravagant praises of its good qualities, and the studious concealment of its blemishes and defects. It is true, perhaps, that these encomiums deceive none but the ignorant and unwary.—But if they are not intended to deceive, why are they employed? In whatever degree trust is reposed in them, that trust is betrayed: and whatever numbers may be guilty of the wrong, they cannot convert it into right. It is the

decision of Cicero, and it is just; that whatever the seller knows respecting what he offers for sale, ought to be fairly explained to the purchaser; because in whatever degree he is kept in ignorance of what he ought to know; in the same degree he is imposed upon and injured. All deception too is in its effects injurious to society; for it weakens that confidence between man and man; on which the advantages and happiness of society so essentially depend.

There are other occasions on which commercial falsehood is practised with a yet greater degree of guilt; because it is confirmed by the sanction of an oath; by the most solemn assurance that man can give to man. Whether the sanctions of religion have not been introduced on too many and too frivolous occasions, has indeed been made a question; but perhaps without due consideration. Where the integrity of the merchant must be depended on for the quality of his merchandise; it does not seem easy to find any tie upon his conscience, more suitable or more efficacious than an oath; and these oaths have unavoidably been multiplied,
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with the encrease of our population, and the extension of our commerce. It is the haste and negligence, with which they are administered on one hand, and the irreverence and indifference; with which they are taken on the other, that has destroyed their solemnity and effect; that has occasioned their being considered, rather as a mere regulation of commerce, than as the most sacred test of truth. — But whatever may have been the numbers or the negligence of those who have gone before us; to each individual the oath still retains its sanctity and obligation; and he who takes it falsely, does not more violate the precepts of religion, than injure the interests of society. For he weakens the best principle on which mutual confidence is supported, truth investigated, and justice administered*.

Nor

* The complaint against the frequency of oaths seems to arise from a notion or a principle, which I can by no means admit to be just; a notion that religion is of too solemn a nature to be generally mixed with our common transactions; that a man in his ordinary business had better leave it out of sight. To this I must decidedly object. Religion is intended to form the universal principle of our conduct; it ought to influence not only our actions,

Nor ought it to be forgotten, that by no appointment of nature or providence are wealth and distinction made necessary to the

but our sentiments, on all occasions, small as well as great. However trifling the transaction may be, in which we are engaged; our integrity in conducting it is always of importance. A man need not always offensively obtrude topics of religion; nor need he be always meditating on its doctrines and its laws: but it should be the fixed and settled principle of his mind, always operating, though not always perceived; and I cannot see why he, who makes it the general guide of his actions, should object to its being brought forward as such; why he, who binds his conscience by the laws of God, should think it improper to assure us explicitly that he does so; and that is the principal end and design of an oath. I am afraid too oaths are sometimes objected to; because men would gladly be excused from taking such, as they are conscious they shall not duly observe; and sometimes as a part of that indifference to religion, and that indisposition to its duties, which so strongly mark the temper and manners of the times. Oaths, however, would not be treated with so much levity; nor be found so extremely inefficacious; were the magistrate always to administer them with proper solemnity; and occasionally to remind such, as by their ignorance or negligence seemed to stand in need of it, of their sanctity and obligation. Where indeed there is such an incorrigible want of principle; such a total inattention to every thing but profit; that an oath is no tie upon the conscience; I know not what other security could be expected to be more effectual.

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attainment of virtue or happiness: and that if they were so, many have obtained them, not only without the practice of any of those unwarrantable artifices, but by their being known to disdain them. Many, and perhaps the greater number, have built high fortune upon fair reputation; and made their way into the temple of honour, by the direct but laborious passage through the temple of virtue.

The perfect morality of the gospel is again frequently violated; and not more by men of business, than by other men; in the evasion of those contributions, which are required for the exigencies of the state. This too some men will endeavour to reconcile to their own consciences, and to justify to others, by maintaining, that the positive statutes of policy have no relation to moral duties; that the omission of what was not required at all, till the legislature required it, is no offence against religion or against God. If you transgress, it is the magistrate's business, they assert, to detect your transgression; to inflict the penalties of the law; and there the matter is to terminate; for that the whole
turns

turns upon policy not morality. This is indeed sometimes the reasoning of the gamester and the felon; and surely it is fit only for them. This principle makes all the obligation to political duties to consist in compulsion; and all the guilt of transgression in being detected; an absurdity, which needs only to be stated, to be exposed. It would make a separation too of our moral from our political duties; a separation, which cannot without some confusion be made in theory, and which in practice can have no existence. But were the separation more easy and practicable than even its advocates suppose it; and were political disobedience, as such, justifiable in itself; it never can be exerted, without involving moral turpitude in its consequences; without injury to individuals of the same community. In the case under consideration, it is obvious, that if one contribute less than his proportion, another must contribute more, and consequently be injured: and were every member to evade his contribution, it is equally obvious, government must immediately cease, and the society be dissolved.

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But the decisive argument is; that every individual is permitted to enter into any given society, or to continue in it upon his personal engagement, expressed or implied, to submit to all its regulations; to perform his social duties; and to bear his proportion of its burthens, while he receives its protection. Obedience to government, therefore, becomes immediately united with his other moral obligations; as well by the reason and necessity of the case, as by the authority of divine revelation.

If then instead of these unjustifiable reasonings, and still more unjustifiable practices, the precepts of Christianity were generally submitted to and obeyed; its most inveterate enemies would soon see and acknowledge the ease and satisfaction, which would be introduced into the daily intercourse of human life. Instead of interested distinctions to evade plain rules of action, we should every where find practical virtue; and instead of sophistical questions on the origin and authority of government, peaceable submission to established laws. Fraud would be banished from our transactions, and the suspicion of it from
our

our minds: our present condition would be almost as much improved, as our prospects for futurity are enlarged and exalted.

3. Men of the world again think Christianity unsuitable to the present life, in its prohibitions of resentment and revenge; and that for various and important reasons. Such prohibitions, appear to them to disparage that courage, which all mankind have agreed to applaud; and in the same degree to teach that pusillanimity, which is universally despised. The desire of revenge, they maintain, is not only natural to the mind of man; but necessary in the present state of morals. From the follies or the vices of those about him every man, they pretend, suffers so many injuries or insults, that it is next to impossible to bear them with patience; and that he, who should receive them without resentment, would forfeit his dignity and character; and expose himself, certainly to loss, and probably to destruction. The same right which permits a man to defend life itself, must permit him, they assert, to defend all its advantages and enjoyments; and that on whatever grounds war be justifiable between different nations;

nations; it must on the same grounds be justifiable between different individuals. They oppose religion; because religion opposes the laws of modern honour; because it does not allow them to vindicate their character, or expiate an affront, with the blood of the offender.

That the precepts of religion condemn what are called the laws of modern honour, will be allowed in the fullest extent; and religion, we trust, may be vindicated by shewing, that common sense and the interests of society equally condemn them. The pretexts, by which they are supported, are unfounded or fallacious.

That courage is universally applauded is true, and it is just; for courage is necessary to every man; to defend himself against personal violence; to support him in the practice of virtue; and to enable him to bear, as he ought, the calamities incident to human life. But this is courage exerted in a cause confessedly good; and he, who in these cases betrays a want of it, is generally and justly despised. It has very little relation to
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the principles or conduct of the duellist; and affords him neither justification nor apology.

That the desire of revenge is natural to the mind of man, is a position which may reasonably be disputed; and perhaps safely denied. The desire of revenge is not found in every mind: and where it exists in the greatest force, does not appear to be so much the instinct of nature, as the effect of our corruption. We are indeed instinctively prompted to self-defence and self-protection; to seek redress for injuries received; with a view both to repair the present loss, and to prevent its repetition. But whatever is more than this, is excessive and vicious; and was generally condemned in the ethics of heathen philosophy, as well as in the precepts of the Christian revelation. In every civilized society too, each individual has relinquished the privilege of avenging his own wrongs; and invested the magistrate with full powers, both to estimate the injury, and to apportion the penalty and redress. The duellist, therefore, without the consent of any party but himself, resumes a right, which he had relinquished; and offends, not more against religion

religion, than against the laws, to which he had himself engaged to submit.

If it be urged that there are offences, from which the law does not protect us; that there are insults to our personal dignity, and outrages upon good manners, which duelling only can restrain or prevent; it is replied, that these offences are rather against our pride than our judgment; that they are generally frivolous and fanciful; to be despised rather than resented; that he, who is careful not to give offence, will seldom receive it; and that, in all events, the sacrifice of good morals is too high a price for the preservation of good manners.

But even this advantage is far from being always secured. The practice of duelling may restrain the weak and timid; but it often adds to the presumption of the bold. It naturally generates insolence and cruelty; exposes to danger the daily intercourse, which it professes to protect; and arms the man of violence, whom it ought to controul. Its effects are therefore at variance with the principle on which it is defended; it often
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aggravates the evils, it is supposed to prevent.

If there be indeed offences, which the laws do not and cannot reach; it is one of those imperfections, which no human institution has yet been able to escape; it is one of the evils of society, which a wise man bears with patience in consideration of its advantages.

If it be again urged, that duelling is, in the important article of self-defence, the only expedient, which can place the weak on a level with the strong; which can protect the former from the violence and oppression of the latter; it is obvious to reply, that admitting it in this view to remedy one evil, it introduces another of at least equal magnitude: it gives full scope to the advantage of superior skill; an advantage not only much more certain in its effects than strength, but much more apt to encourage a disposition to exert it. What is lost by the strong, therefore, is not gained by the weak, but by the skilful: one class of men are deprived of an advantage, which nature had
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given them ; but art transfers the benefit to another ; and dexterity of hand obtains a more dangerous superiority than strength possessed before.

If it be again maintained, that Christian nations in general tacitly admit the utility of duelling ; because they oftener connive at, than punish, the duellist ; it may be replied ; that almost all Christian nations have prohibited duelling by their laws ; though it may have been found difficult to carry those laws fully into execution. If the practice be morally wrong, the connivance of the magistrate cannot make it right. Civil institutions are seldom efficacious against public and established opinions. Governments, in the administration of justice, make allowance for human infirmities ; and have frequently only a choice of difficulties ; and connive at one evil to prevent a greater.

If it be further urged, that as war between different nations is sometimes admitted to be justifiable ; it must on similar grounds be justifiable between different individuals ; the comparison contains an obvious fallacy. War

is justifiable only for self-defence; and the aggressor is always criminal. When one nation persists in conduct injurious to another, there is no authority mutually acknowledged, to which they can appeal, and by the decision of which they are bound to abide; and it is by war only that the injured community can obtain a compensation for the grievances already sustained, or guard against their repetition. But between individuals, injuries may and ought to be redressed by the laws of their country. It is indeed an essential principle of society; that its members be protected against mutual injustice; and that each peaceably submit to its decisions, in return for the protection he enjoys.

It is a fair mode of trying the expediency of any principle, to suppose it universal; and then to consider its certain or probable effects. Were the principles of the duellist to become general; were every man to insist upon being judge and avenger in his own cause; the laws would immediately be rendered nugatory and useless; the greatest and best advantages of civilized society would be lost;

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for the social union itself must be in its most essential articles dissolved.

It is an acknowledged maxim amongst philosophers and statesmen, as well as divines; that no man is invested with full authority over his own life; to expose or destroy it at his own choice and discretion. The life of the humblest individual, they justly maintain, is of some certain or probable value to his family, friends, or connections; that he owes services to the community, which protects him; that as he is indebted to others for much of the good which he enjoys, he ought to endeavour to repay the kindness that he has received; and that by sacrificing his life without necessity, he is guilty of a desertion of duty, as criminal as it is unnatural. Now however unjustifiable this may be with respect to a man's own life; it must be still more unjustifiable with respect to the life of another: and what then shall be urged in vindication of the duellist, who is guilty of the double offence at once; who in the same moment attempts the life of his adversary, and hazards the loss of his own?

As far as it is the object of duelling to seek redress for injuries real or supposed, it implies an unavoidable absurdity: for its laws require that no advantage be given to him by whom the injury has been sustained. Instead therefore of inflicting a penalty upon the aggressor for the first offence; it is careful to afford him an equal chance to commit a second; and instead of ensuring redress to the sufferer, it exposes him to a new danger.

The avowed object of the duellist is the defence of his honour: and though it may not be easy to determine precisely what is meant by the expression; when injured honour has received its proper vindication; it is, however, not difficult to decide, how far duelling can really support the character of the duellist. Its whole efficacy amounts to this. It will ascertain, on one hand, whether he who receives an insult will resent it at the hazard of life; and on the other, whether he who has been unguarded or unprincipled enough to be guilty of that insult, has resolution, at the same hazard, to defend his conduct.

Here then surely are few of those advantages, which it is the boasted privilege of duelling to seek and to obtain; here is neither justice nor reparation, neither punishment nor revenge*. Let not therefore the
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* The truth is, that duelling is not, and cannot be, defended upon any principle of reason or good morals; it is supported by public opinion alone. There are certain insults of language or of action; determined however not so much by any fixed and general rule, as by the circumstances of each particular case; which by a kind of tacit agreement men of a certain rank in life, and they only, are expected to resent by a challenge; and he, who does not so resent them, is considered as deficient in spirit and degraded in character; he is not so well received in society in general; and from certain companies he is entirely excluded. What is worse, indeed, he who has given the offence, and knows himself to be blameable, must not acknowledge his fault, till he has shewn that he is not afraid to defend it. Nay, what is worst of all; hardly any man of good understanding and principles engages in a duel without the utmost reluctance; without an insuperable conviction that it is unjustifiable; and if his antagonist falls, never ceases to regret and lament it. The late king of Prussia established a court of honour; to which all such offences, as usually occasion duelling, were referred; and is said by this means to have in a great measure suppressed the practice in his dominions. Could indeed any vindication of character be devised, let's absurd

precepts of revelation be censured for condemning those hostile passions of our nature; which it is the aim of all civil institutions to restrain; for prohibiting a practice, as absurd in the individual, as pernicious to the public. Nor let Christianity be supposed to relax her sacred rules in favour of the rash, the violent, and the resentful. The sons of God can make no compromise with the sons of Belial; the Christian cannot be united with the duellist*.

4. Ano-

and pernicious, and likely to be in any degree effectual, public authority would surely be well employed in supporting and enforcing it; and in the mean time it is the duty of every good man to endeavour to rectify public opinion on the subject; to turn it from duelling, guilt, and bloodshed, in favour of peace, humanity, and religion. If it should be thought that I have dwelt too long on the subject of duelling, and noticed arguments, which hardly deserve it; my only apology is, that I was not willing to leave the duellist any pretext unrefuted. I wished to shew him, not only that there are many good arguments against the practice; but that there are none in its favour.

* In answer to those who object to our religion on account of its prohibitions of duelling, or think the one consistent with the other, it should be observed; that their whole argument rests upon a supposed disobedience to the laws

4. Another, and perhaps a more general, complaint against Christianity, is founded on the gravity and solemnity, of its character, and the supposed rigour of its laws. A very numerous class of men; many of the young, the gay, and the dissipated; look upon our religion as naturally the enemy of cheerfulness and festivity, of all pleasure and of all enjoyment. They feel a repugnance to the exercises of devotion, as requiring not only a serious, but even a melancholy, frame of mind; and to its precepts, as a rigid system of mortification and self-denial. They conceive, that all the affections of the heart are to be checked by gloomy meditations on the life to come; and that, as a preparation for it, every gratification of the senses is to be resisted and refused. They therefore either reject its doctrines and duties at once, as in-

laws of that religion. Had the precepts of Christianity their full effect upon the minds and lives of men; all our disquisitions on the guilt or innocence of duelling would be superseded: for duelling itself must cease. Were all men as upright and as benevolent, as revelation enjoins them to be, there would be neither injury nor resentment, neither offence nor revenge.

admissible in themselves, because irreconcilable to the propensities of nature; or, what proves in the end equally mischievous, they postpone their attention to them to some more sedate period of life; till habit unhappily produces the effects of infidelity; and they lose; not only all relish for the immediate offices of religion; but too often all regard for its authority and its laws.

That our religion has sometimes been thus represented, by its injudicious friends, or by its artful enemies, is indeed as true in point of fact, as, we trust, the representation is in itself unjust. Such opinions are supported by those only, who have mistaken the nature and tendency of revelation; or who wish to excite prejudices against it. They may perhaps be found in the disquisitions of the infidel; but cannot be traced in the pages of scripture: or they may have been heard in the tabernacle or conventicle; but are in no degree countenanced by our established church. They have been drawn from the gloomy caverns of superstition; not derived from the celestial light of revelation.

It may be shewn, on one hand, that religion forbids only such excesses, as our own reason must condemn; and on the other, that it actually improves and exalts every innocent and rational enjoyment.

The votary of intemperance offends as much against prudence and policy, as against good morals; he is as much his own enemy, as the enemy of religion. He generally soon impairs or destroys those faculties; which were given to be the guide of his virtue, and the source of his best enjoyments. He wastes his time, his fortune, and his health; which ought to have been employed in promoting the happiness of his fellow-creatures; for the sake of his own; and in repaying to others those advantages, which every man has received. By that languor or disease, which is the constant effect of riot and excess, he soon renders himself incapable of the festivity he sought; which temperance would have enabled him to continue; and, in conjunction with temperance, religion would not have denied. By the gradual depravation of all the powers both of body and mind, which licentiousness never fails to produce, he

he becomes incapable of that purity and refinement, which reason, as well as religion, teaches us, are necessary to the true dignity and happiness of our nature. Let it not then be made an objection to divine revelation; that it condemns what appears to be injurious alike to the individual, and to society; and what indeed all, who have tried it, confess to have failed of its own object: and let it now be enquired; whether religion do not improve and exalt every innocent and rational enjoyment.

If we contemplate the constitution of the world and the course of nature, in conjunction with our own faculties of body and mind, we shall see abundant reason to conclude, that we were not intended for repining and sorrow, but for satisfaction and contentment; not for sullen submission to irresistible authority; but for chearful obedience to laws, which, while they prescribe our duty, direct us to happiness.

The satisfying the simplest appetites of nature is attended with a high degree of pleasure. The rest, which after fatigue fits

us again for our duty; and the food, that repairs our strength; are sought not only because they are necessary, but because they are delightful. We desire them for our pleasure, without waiting to reflect upon their use.

The author of nature has made industry necessary to the acquisition of almost every good; and industry often appears irksome and painful. But in return its success is always pleasant. Such is the frame of our minds, that scarce any satisfaction is greater than that of obtaining by our own exertions the object of our pursuit: hardly any acquisition is so much valued, as that which is the reward of our own diligence and skill*.

Of all the duties which men are required to perform, the parental seem to be attended

* It is observable, on the other hand, that all the malignant passions are painful to the breast which they inhabit; they are the natural tyrants of the mind, and equally destroy its purity and its quiet. But the humane and benevolent affections never fail to delight the heart, by which they are encouraged. They are the sources, not more of our brightest virtues, than of our highest enjoyments.

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with the greatest difficulty and anxiety: yet such is the delight also attending them, that they are the last which any man is willing to relinquish; they do not more constitute the business of his life, than its pleasure; they are as much his happiness, as his virtue.

But independent and unconnected with any duties, nature presents us with innumerable objects of delight; with streams of pleasure from a thousand springs. The succession of day and night, and the continual variation of the seasons, are hardly more the causes of our industry, than of our amusement. The general intercourse with our fellow-creatures; the company of our friends, and our domestic attachments, are sources of perpetual gratification. Nor must we forget, as well the more elegant and liberal arts, the productions of the poet, the musician, and the painter, as the thousand others, of inferior dignity perhaps, but not inferior use, that are daily administering to our wants, our conveniences, or our pleasures. Such indeed is the constitution of our minds, that we soon learn to find gratification, not only where it
might

might naturally be expected; but also in what should seem more likely to pain our sensibility and depress our spirits; not only in the records of the improvement and happiness of our fellow-creatures; but of their misery or destruction; not only in the details of commerce, science, and civilization; but in the narratives of war, of pestilence, and famine. We delight to view, not only the palace of elegance and grandeur, and the landscape smiling with flowers and fertility; but the ruins of the noblest edifice; the rock that has been rent by the thunder; and the ocean agitated by the tempest. It is also of importance to reflect, that the value of all these gratifications will be essentially enhanced, by the sentiments with which they ought to be received; by our gratitude to him who gives them. It is true that much of the pleasure we derive from these sources is the effect of our own industry, our ingenuity, or our habits; but still it must be considered as the bounty of our Creator. The author of nature, is the author of whatever good nature can produce; it is God that gives, whatever he has given us powers to obtain.

The amusements thus copiously placed before us, we shall not find prohibited by revelation. . What God has given, his laws do not forbid us to enjoy. His laws do indeed prescribe rules for our indulgence in the bounties of nature. But these rules are themselves calculated and intended to secure and to improve the enjoyment. They prescribe such temperance in the indulgence of our senses, as would continue our gratification, and secure our health; and such command over tumultuous passions, as would guard the tranquillity of our own minds, and of those about us. They enjoin such integrity in our transactions, and such humanity in our general conduct, as would quickly establish our character, and effectually promote our interest; as would ensure the applause of our fellow-creatures, supported and enhanced by the approbation of our own conscience. This then surely is the system, above all others, that will preserve the equanimity, which philosophy in vain endeavoured to teach; and that cheerfulness of heart, which is itself the best ingredient in every enjoyment of life. . And what reason might teach us to expect from our religion, experience will confirm :

confirm : for the truest content and satisfaction are always found with the humble, the innocent, and the pious.

In support of these sentiments may be adduced both the language of scripture, and the immediate duties of religion.—It is Solomon's opinion of wisdom ; that *her ways are ways of pleasantness, and that all her paths are peace.* St. Paul calls upon his converts of Thessalonica to *rejoice evermore.* And our Saviour himself performed his first miracle to encourage the hilarity of a festival. The immediate duties of religion, which revelation teaches, are calculated and intended to bring to the minds of all, except the guilty and impenitent, comfort and encouragement, hope and joy. The principal ceremonies of the Jewish service were their solemn festivals, the feast of the dedication, or the feast of the passover ; and in our own church, not only hymns of praise and thanksgiving form a part of our worship ; but our sabbath itself is considered as a festival.

From our religion, however, though every way friendly, in the present life, to its faithful followers, more must not be required than

the author of that religion has given us reason to expect. It will not visibly alter the nature of things in their favour; nor confound the order established in the world. It will not interfere with the relative situations of men in society; by changing the circumstances of the rich and poor, the humble and the exalted, the freeman and the slave. It will not exempt men from the casualties naturally incident to humanity; from care, vexation, and disappointment; from pain, sickness, and death. It does not exclude, for it teaches us to expect, such temporal calamities, as we believe providence to inflict; in order to restrain or correct the disobedient; and to try and prove the faith and firmness of the just. It will not remove from men the ill effects of their former transgressions, upon their character, fortune, or health; it will not protect them from the fraud or violence of the wicked; nor exempt them from their share in general and national distress.

But though there are cases, in which our religion may fail compleatly to effect our temporal prosperity; or to effect it in the mode, which our wayward imaginations might desire; yet will it still perform what
it

it professes. It will alleviate the calamities, it does not prevent; and exalt the best enjoyments by *the hope of better things to come.*

Epicurus is celebrated by one of his disciples *, as the great benefactor of his followers, the atheistical sensualists of antiquity, in having released their minds from the fear of the gods; a sentiment, which they considered, as a useless oppression on their spirits, and a painful restraint upon their enjoyments. To the infidels of modern times the reality of this service may be questioned; or its advantages denied. It has been maintained, with every appearance of truth, that no man of reflection can wholly divest himself of the belief of the existence and providence of God; and consequently that they, who make profession of infidelity, own a conviction which they do not feel; and while they deny with their lips a future state of responsibility, they not seldom confess it by their fears. Unbelievers, indeed, as is universally known, have often acknowledged that their guilty pleasures were alloyed

* Lucret. lib. 6.

by involuntary apprehensions of a judgment to come. In the hour of sickness or solitude, in moments of reflection, or on the approach of death, they have doubted the truth of their former principles, or wholly retracted their infidelity. And it has from hence been concluded, that the boasted service of Epicurus never was performed.

The sincerity of the professions of the infidel, however, cannot in every instance be disproved. Allowing him therefore the fullest conviction of the truth of his own tenets; let us enquire whether he can rationally claim those advantages of superior peace of mind, which the poet of atheism has so eloquently displayed. Instead of a Deity, let him suppose the universe to have been formed by atoms and chance; by fate and necessity; or by any other power, of whatever name or nature; the same power, that gave existence to things in their present state, may, in opposition to all the arguments of the atheist, give existence also to a world to come. Whatever cause established this chequered scene of good and evil, where vice and virtue, happiness and misery, are in some degree pro-

promiscuously united; where *there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked*; the same cause may have ordained a future state also of recompence and retribution; where all these irregularities shall be rectified, and reward and punishment distributed in exact proportion to merit or to guilt. On the principles of atheism, therefore, the apprehensions of future responsibility for our conduct cannot with certainty, or even rationally, be removed.

With respect to the fear of temporal evil, infidelity surely gives no advantages. That human life is perpetually exposed to vexation and disappointment; that every man feels the want of some superior power, on which he may rely, either to avert the evils that threaten him, or to support him under them; I need not waste time in proving; for it will not be denied. But if we believe these evils either to arise solely from chance and accident; or to be previously ordained by fate and necessity; our fears of them must be augmented, not diminished: we are left without hope to avoid them; and without support when they fall. The professions of the infidel, then, are either the result of his own

conviction, or they are not. If the latter; they are empty and criminal ostentation: and if the former, their natural tendency is to aggravate the evils, which it is pretended, they are calculated to remove.

Admit but, on the contrary, the existence and providence of *the God of the Christians*, and the reality of that *life and immortality*, which the gospel *has brought to light*; and the inequalities of our present state appear no longer unintelligible or inequitable; calamity is no longer without consolation, nor death itself without hope. It is indeed the exclusive privilege of divine revelation, to explain the true cause of physical and moral evil; and to furnish adequate motives to resignation under them. It is the unrivalled glory of our religion, to have proclaimed the certainty of a life to come; where the due distinction shall be made between the righteous and the wicked; and every man recompensed, *according to what he hath done in the body*. It is from faith in the gospel of Christ, and from that only, that we can justly or rationally adopt the sentiments and the language of the prophet; *although the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither*

neither shall fruit be in the vine; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls; yet will we rejoice in the Lord, and joy in the God of our salvation.

5. There is one point more, in which the suitability of the Christian revelation to the present state of human nature and human life, must not be overlooked; its adaption to our appetites and passions. How indeed a creature intended for trial and probation, for present exertion and future responsibility, could have been formed without passions, without desires stimulating him to activity, and liable to excess, we are not able to conceive: and we therefore consider those passions as an important and essential part of human nature. Had then a religion been offered for our acceptance, which either omitted all attention to these passions, or commanded what was incompatible with their gratification and effects; which called upon us to guide our actions by motives, of which they did not form any part; or which required their total suppression or extirpation;

to such a religion we might, with great appearance of justice, have objected, as difficult to be believed and embraced; because unfuitable to our nature and situation; or as impossible to have proceeded from our Creator; because inconsistent with what he had already given. But the aim of the Christian religion is, not to extinguish those appetites, which the author of that religion implanted; but to direct them to their proper objects; to restrain their irregularities and excesses; and to indulge them as far as they are guiltless and useful. It is to gratify what were given in a state of innocence, not what our corruption has introduced. Christianity encourages all the benevolent and nobler propensities of our nature: its obvious tendency is, to ripen instincts into morals; to graft virtues on the stock of the natural affections. A few examples, from some of the leading passions of the human heart, will illustrate what has been asserted, and, it is presumed, establish its truth.

The strongest and most universal passion of the human mind is self-love; so strong and so universal indeed, that many able philosophers

Philosophers have maintained it to be our sole motive and principle of action; and it is obvious that, in the common intercourse of life, by this we expect every man to be guided. We depend upon him, whose interest we know it is, to act as we desire. To this accordingly the precepts of divine revelation are addressed. It is for our own sakes that we are required to perform the duties it enjoins. Obedience will be followed by reward, and transgression by punishment. Here is no unmeaning declamation on the beauty of virtue, the fitness of things, or the authority of truth. But a direct and intelligible obligation: to pursue the path of duty; because it leads to happiness, which all men constantly desire; and to shun the unhallowed tracks of vice; because they terminate in misery, the natural object of our terror and aversion.

Mixed with self-love in the mind, we find the love of our fellow-creatures. And whether this be a native quality of the heart, or an acquired virtue, or both united, needs not now be a question: its existence and utility are all that the present purpose demands,

mands. This the scripture calls charity; and St. Paul pronounces it to be *the greatest of all virtues*. It is the principle from which proceeds whatever we applaud under the names of generosity, benevolence, and humanity: and in perfect unison with the best sentiments of the best men, revelation commands us *to love our neighbour as ourselves*; and declares that *love to be the fulfilling of the law*.

In subservience to our self-love and social, the motives of action, by which we are most powerfully influenced, are our hopes and fears; the hope of what we believe to be good, and the fear of the opposite evil; and to these all the precepts of Christianity are immediately addressed. The prohibitions of the gospel are with threats, and its *commandments with promise*. *The wicked shall go away into everlasting punishment; but the righteous into life eternal*.

In the human mind the desire of knowledge is universal and insatiable; and the Christian revelation, above every thing else, promises to gratify and indulge it. The im-
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perfection of science, and the narrow limits of our information in the present life, are every where felt and confessed: and on theological subjects, more than on any other, *we now see through a glass darkly*. Nothing so much disappoints the enquiries of curiosity; nothing so much humbles the aspiring pride of reason; as the attributes of the Deity, and the mysteries of our redemption. But we are taught to hope, that in the future state of our existence our faculties will be enlarged, as well as purified; and that we shall be enabled and permitted to understand many of those appearances in the government of the world, which at present most perplex us. One of the rewards of our duty will be the gratification of our love of knowledge. And we cannot doubt but all the proceedings of providence, when fully understood, will appear as equitable, as they now seem irregular; and that we shall have as much cause to admire their wisdom and consistency, as to adore their justice and benevolence. *Hereafter*, the apostle has assured us, *we shall know, even as we are known; and that eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man,*
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the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.

Another powerful passion of the human mind is ambition, the love of honour and distinction: and this too is expressly encouraged by divine revelation. But it is directed to its proper object, and confined within due bounds. It is directed, not like the pride and vanity of the world, to the temporal and personal aggrandisement of the individual, at the expence of his fellow-creatures; not to their destruction in war, or their subjection to his power; in order to obtain for him the shouts of the multitude, or the gratification of criminal desire*: but it is directed to the imitation of him, by whom it was implanted; to benevolence and beneficence; to the promotion of peace, virtue, and happiness amongst his fellow-creatures;

* "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom; neither let the mighty man glory in his might; let not the rich man glory in his riches. But let him that glorieth, glory in this; that he understandeth and knoweth me; that I am the Lord, which exercise loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the Lord." Jerem. ix. 23, 24.

in order to obtain the favour of his Creator, and by *patient continuance in well-doing, glory, and honour, and immortality.* To stimulate us to our best exertions, we are assured, that *in our father's house are many mansions*; where our rank in glory will be in proportion to the improvement of our talents: according to our conduct shall we receive *a prophet's, or a righteous man's, reward*: according to our desert, shall we be *the greatest or the least in the kingdom of heaven**.

* It will, no doubt, be observed by the philosopher, or the scorner, that no notice has been taken of a passion, which is not only among the most universal and powerful, but which has more influence on morality, and occasions more disturbance in society, than almost any other; the passion by which the species is continued. To this the answer is not difficult. Of this passion the records of revelation every where suppose the indulgence; within such limits as may not corrupt our own hearts, injure our neighbour, or violate the laws of the society in which we live. No provision is indeed made for it in the life to come: because its whole purpose being attained here, we suppose that hereafter it will have no existence. As if purposely to guard against such an objection, the petulant Sadduces were told that, *in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage; but are as the angels of God in heaven.* Matt. xxii. 30.

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If then there be any truth in the statement that has been given; if the tendency of the Christian revelation be to promote the comfort and satisfaction, as well as the virtue, of mankind in their present state; to excite cheerfulness and hope, not dejection and terror, in the human mind; if instead of a perpetual war with all our passions and propensities, it teach us only to correct what is excessive and pernicious, in order more fully to gratify what is innocent and useful; if there be this admirable conformity between our interests and our duty; between the pursuit of present and of future happiness; between the internal frame of our minds and our external condition; between the book of nature and the word of God; upon these grounds we should build, not surely an objection to the authenticity of this revelation, but an argument in favour of its credibility; not a reluctance to its authority, but a recommendation of its utility. Our own deductions should lead us to conclude, with the dictate of the apostle; that *godliness is profitable unto all things; having the promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.*

SERMON

SERMON V.

ON THE MYSTERIOUS DOCTRINES OF
CHRISTIANITY.

2 PET. III. 16.

In which are some things hard to be understood.

ONE of the most interesting, and yet one of the most difficult, subjects, on which human reason can be employed, is its own nature, its powers, and its duties. Its extent and its limitations, what it is able to effect, and what it ought not to attempt, are not, and probably cannot be, precisely defined. In many of our researches we feel its weakness at every step; and yet we advance in the confidence of its strength. We daily see the fallibility of those who have gone before us; and we often censure their errors

errors and their presumption; yet we continue to require from others, or to hope to obtain by our own efforts, demonstration and certainty on subjects, where perhaps probability or testimony only ought to be expected. In many branches of art and science, indeed, the acquisitions already made encourage us to proceed in pursuit of still further discoveries; and the means of ascertaining the truth are so much within our reach, or within our hopes, that it seems fair to demand scientific proof, before any new theory is admitted; or to withhold our assent, till unquestionable evidence is produced. But in one important point reason has been equally confident of her own strength; where her confidence was less justifiable, or less judicious. In the case of divine revelation she has made her own supposed powers an objection to her faith; and refused to receive such truths as she could not fully understand.

It has been urged, not only against the church of England, but against Christianity itself, that many of its peculiar doctrines are too abstruse and mysterious; not level to the capacities

capacities of those for whose instruction it professes itself to be intended; that they are incomprehensible, and therefore incredible. Admitting, say the objectors, that human reason was not able to teach men their duty, and *to make them wise unto salvation*; and that consequently supernatural assistance was necessary; how are we to receive that as a divine revelation, which opposes to the very faculties, by which alone we can judge of its nature and authenticity, mysteries that perplex them, and difficulties, which they cannot surmount. By our reason only can we interpret the meaning of this supposed revelation, or apply it to the regulation of our sentiments and conduct; yet many of its truths are confessedly such as reason cannot explain. Surely, say they, a God of wisdom and goodness would have made that easy, which was so valuable; if it was necessary to all, the knowledge of it should have been by all attainable. Surely, if God created man, and gave him a revelation, he would have adapted the one to the other; he would either have lowered the doctrines to our capacities; or enlarged our capacities to comprehend the doctrines. It is asserted too, that

that these mysteries have not been favourable, but prejudicial, to piety and good morals; that they have deterred many from embracing Christianity itself; and that amongst its followers and its advocates they have occasioned difference of opinion and controversy; and consequently have interrupted the peace and diminished the charity, which it is one professed object of the gospel to promote. The objectors, therefore, are led to conclude; either that the Deity has given no such revelation, as we conceive it to be our duty to teach; or that he has given it, as well adapted to our faculties, as worthy of himself; as clear and intelligible, as it is valuable and necessary: they conclude that all the mysteries we complain of, are the comments and glosses of human reason; either the unfortunate mistakes of ignorance and superstition, or the interested devices of policy and power.

Such was the objection of the Epicurean philosopher*, while Christianity was yet in its infancy; such has continually been the objection of the sceptic and the infidel; and

* Celsus apud Orig.

such is still one objection of a numerous description of separatists from our national church.

In the attempt to invalidate this objection it will not be pretended, that these mysterious doctrines do not exist in our religion; or that any new and clearer interpretation of them is to be produced. It is intended only to offer some considerations to shew, that mystery is consistent with credibility; that what is not, or cannot be, the object of our senses, or the proper subject of science, may yet be reasonably an article of religious belief.

It is hardly necessary to add, that by mysteries I wish to be understood all those doctrines of our church, which have been usually known by the term: such, for example, as the doctrine of the Holy Trinity; of the union of the divine and human nature in the person of Christ; and of the operations of the holy spirit: all those, in short, the abstruseness of which has at any time been alledged; either by the sectary, as the cause of his dissenting from the ecclesiastical establishment of his country; or by the sceptic,

as one reason for his doubting or denying the divine origin of our religion; either by those, who are disposed to adopt a Christianity with fewer mysteries and difficulties; or by those, who, in their zeal for the powers of reason, and the rejection of mysteries, have been led to reject divine revelation itself.

1. That there are mysterious doctrines in our religion; that it *contains*, if we may be allowed to apply the words of the apostle to our present purpose, *some things hard to be understood*, is readily admitted. It cannot, and need not, be denied. Such doctrines were not only naturally to be expected, but clearly unavoidable, in a divine revelation; and therefore do not invalidate their own truth or credibility. Whatever declares or implies the physical attributes of the Deity, must be above the comprehension of the human mind.

All our ideas of spirit are negative, and therefore obscure. When we attempt to form a notion of a spiritual substance ourselves, or to explain it to others, we do not describe

describe so much what it is, as what it is not; we do not combine the properties of things we already know, but exclude the properties of every thing else. All our ideas on the subject, therefore, are confused and indefinite; incapable of precision, demonstration, or certainty. And such as our ideas of spirit are, such must be our ideas of its operations. We know not how spirit acts upon spirit, or upon matter, or how matter acts upon spirit. In whatever therefore the agency of spirit is concerned, there will inevitably be some degree of obscurity. And this obscurity will be increased by an unavoidable deficiency in our language. What is imperfectly conceived, will always be imperfectly expressed. And language borrowed from material objects, as all language evidently has been, will but inadequately describe spirit and its operations. In all disquisitions, therefore, upon such points, ambiguities will necessarily arise; obscurity cannot be avoided. These considerations alone are sufficient to shew that those doctrines of our religion, which are thought most mysterious, are not therefore incredible; and that all the arguments drawn by comparison and analogy from material

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objects,

objects, to prove certain articles of our creed absurd and contradictory, are inconclusive and fallacious. The properties of matter and spirit are so different, that what is true of the former, is not therefore necessarily true of the latter; and inferences from each, instead of being the same, may be not only very different, but the very reverse of one another. These observations are not designed to encourage a general scepticism respecting spirit and its operations; but to deprive our adversaries of an argument, in which they sometimes triumph. They relate only to the physical properties of spirit; with which no man pretends to be fully acquainted. Its moral attributes and principles must be analogous to our own; or they cannot concern us.

2. Mysterious doctrines again are inseparable from such a revelation, as we believe to have been given; not only as it must involve the spiritual nature and physical properties of the Deity, which all allow to be incomprehensible; but as it asserts, what leads to consequences little less perplexing, his moral attributes, his providence, and our redemp-

redemption. It does not treat simply of our duties to each other, of transactions between man and man; but of the connection between man and his God; of our creation by his power, our obedience to his laws, and our dependence upon his bounty and protection. It not only enjoins the due government of our passions, and points out the true path to happiness in the present life; but announces to us new and sublimer objects of our hopes and fears, the rewards and punishments of futurity according to our merits or our offences. It informs us, not only how man fell from a state of innocence by transgression, and became unable to deserve or to obtain the favour of his maker; but of the wonderful and merciful means by which that favour may be recovered; of the incarnation of the only Son of God; and his being made the propitiation for our sins; of our justification by faith and repentance; and our sanctification by the holy spirit. It assures us, not only that we have souls intended and fitted for immortality; but that there shall be also a resurrection of these perishable bodies; that the present union of matter and spirit in the constitution of human nature

shall indeed suffer a temporary interruption in the grave; but that it shall hereafter be restored in a state exempt from end or change. These topicks of themselves present difficulties as numerous as they are unavoidable; and we have multiplied and aggravated them by endeavouring to become *wise above what is written*; by attempting to understand what scripture has left in obscurity; and to explain to others what neither we have faculties to explain, nor they to comprehend. On subjects so extraordinary, so difficult, and so interesting, indeed, curiosity must necessarily be excited; and we cannot wonder that men have frequently attempted by various modes of illustration to render that easy of belief, which it is our duty to believe; to reconcile that to our reason, to which the assent of reason is required. But of these attempts the success, however considerable, can never be complete; and the advantage to religion and virtue, if not questionable in itself, is certainly not without alloy. If they have been productive of good, they have also been attended with evil; if they have often brought conviction to the friends of religion; they have sometimes excited in its enemies
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ridicule or disgust. The proper enquiry is, not whether such doctrines can be minutely explained, but whether they can reasonably be believed; whether, though they cannot be objects of science, they may not become articles of faith.

3. In order to ascertain this, the first and great enquiry will be, whether they are in their own nature possible. We are not to consider the credibility of the doctrines of revelation as on a level with the credibility of ordinary or general information. It stands upon a principle of its own. In perusing the narrative of any transaction we calculate the probability of its truth, upon a scale proportioned to the power and disposition of the agent. In the history of human affairs we admit that to be probable, which men like ourselves are able to perform; and we believe it upon ordinary evidence: we carry our belief to extraordinary points only when the abilities of the man, or the force of testimony, correspond to the nature of the facts. But in the proceedings of providence we do not consider any thing as incredible in itself, which does not imply either a physical im-

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possibility, or a violation of his moral attributes. We do not conceive it possible for omnipotence itself to make a part equal to the whole; or to cause the same proportion to be at once true and false; and we should deem it impiety to suppose that he would violate those distinctions between right and wrong, which he has himself established; that he would punish obedience, or reward transgression. But within these limits we consider *all things as possible with God*: and therefore as credible, whenever sufficient evidence is produced, that the supposed effects of his power really proceeded from it, and that what claims to be his word, can justly plead his authority. It is upon these grounds that good and wise men have believed, and conceived themselves bound to believe, the reality of miracles and the truth of mysteries; and to depend upon the full accomplishment of all the threats and promises of the gospel.

4. If then the mysterious doctrines of our religion cannot be shewn to be physically impossible, they are not in their own nature incredible: they may be believed, on the
same

same principle that we believe any thing else, when satisfactory evidence of the points in question is produced. This is indeed the natural and proper foundation of faith. By our senses we obtain certainty; by demonstration, knowledge; but faith, by testimony. By far the greater part of what we generally call our knowledge, we have received upon evidence alone. All our belief in history is founded upon our opinion of the veracity of the historian: all our acquaintance with countries we have not visited, depends upon the confidence we repose in the narrative of the traveller: in the study of the productions of nature we trust to the experiments and the conclusions of our fellow-students; and even in mathematical science we rest a considerable portion of our knowledge on the axioms and demonstrations of those who have gone before us. Every thing, in short, which we have not acquired by our own personal investigation, is received upon evidence alone. And this is not more true in point of fact; than it is necessary from the constitution of the world. Were we, even in temporal concerns, to trust solely to our own observation and experience,

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rience, our stock of knowledge would not only be small and of little value, but always imperfect and incomplete: life would be lost, before knowledge, sufficient for the purposes of life, could possibly be obtained. Why then should not evidence be admitted as a proper ground of faith in the truths of religion, as well as of science! of confidence in the word of God, as well as in the veracity of man! Why should we complain that the Almighty has made the same principle the basis of moral duty, which is the general basis of the transactions of daily life!

It is true that some of the doctrines of Christianity are *hard to be understood*; and it ought therefore to be supported by testimony proportioned to the difficulties it contains. It is true that this supposed revelation is a point of all others the most important to us; and may therefore reasonably be expected to be furnished with evidence of its own authenticity the most decisive and unquestionable. And this upon enquiry will be found to be the case. Let the prophecies of scripture be viewed in their series, their consistency, and their completion; let the
reputed

reputed miracles be considered in their number, their notoriety, and their witnesses; let the morality of the gospel be examined in its superiority over every other system of ethics, and in its adaptation to the nature and situation of mankind; let the records of each be compared in their probable authenticity, with the records of any other transactions equally distant from us in time and place; and these objects united will form such a body and weight of evidence, as, whilst it is not required in any other case, can certainly in no other case be obtained. The present purpose, however, is not to discuss the evidences of revelation, but to state as a general principle; that testimony may be a sufficient ground of belief in truths which we cannot demonstrate, or in facts, which we cannot explain; that the evidence of Christianity is the natural foundation of Christian faith.

In religion, however, it concerns us to remember, that our faith must not stop at the simple act of the understanding. To believe the truths of Christianity, as we believe the ordinary truths of history and science,

science, is not what our Creator has promised to accept and reward. In the common transactions of life, what we believe generally influences our conduct: our opinions, stimulated by our passions, are the foundations of our actions: and in religion such a faith is required, as may prompt to exertion; as may teach us not only to believe in God, but to love and fear him; as may animate our affections, while it regulates them, and become the motive of action, and the principle of duty. The tree is known and estimated only by its fruits. Our virtues have merit and value only when exerted as acts of obedience to the commands of God. The language of religion itself is, that we must *shew our faith by our works; because that faith without works is dead.*

5. Before we reject revelation on account of its mysterious doctrines, let us recollect, that our information must somewhere terminate. Were the mysteries, which now perplex us, explained; others would be brought within our view. As we advanced in the knowledge of the Almighty and his proceedings, new wonders and new difficulties

ties would successively arise; and fresh curiosity be excited, as the first was gratified. In human science one discovery does little else than produce the desire of more. The student of nature may proceed one step further than his fellows; he may demonstrate that what is usually deemed the cause of any visible effect, is itself but the effect of a cause more general and remote. But he still finds his acquisitions incomplete and unsatisfactory. The more he knows, the more he perceives to be still unknown. Thus would it be with respect to the doctrines of Christianity. Were the veil removed from what is at present concealed, it would but shew us another veil concealing other mysteries; and we might still complain that our religion was burthened with difficulties; that we were still required to believe, what we were not permitted to understand. How far soever we might be allowed to proceed, we must at last arrive at the point, where our faculties would fail us; where more intelligence could not be given, because we have not capacity to receive it. At this point, it is possible, we may be already arrived. Omniscience, however, we apprehend, cannot be conferred
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upon us, or upon any other creature; and the Almighty is the proper judge; not only of what degree of information we are capable of receiving; but of what is the fittest and best for us: and we cannot doubt but that his wisdom and goodness will as certainly grant what is useful and beneficial, as that he will withhold what would be unprofitable or prejudicial.

As an additional reason for acquiescing in these mysteries we should recollect, that revelation, with all its blessings, as well as its information, is a favour spontaneously bestowed, not a debt that we could have claimed; we owe it, not to any merit of our own, but to the bounty of its author. Our duty therefore obviously is gratitude and resignation; to be thankful for what has been given; and not to murmur at what has been denied.

6. It may reconcile us still further to the mysteries in our religion to reflect that there are mysteries equally great in almost every thing around us. Not a subject can be named, which the human mind can be said fully

fully to understand. How little we know of spirit and its operations has been already observed; and we do not know much more of matter and its qualities. To a few of its exterior properties we have indeed given names and descriptions. We measure its bulk, delineate its form, and denominate its colour: but we cannot penetrate beyond its surface. Of the operations of nature we see the effects, and can often successfully investigate the immediate causes. But how these effects are produced, or why each should follow from any given cause, we are wholly unable to discover. By what process the acorn becomes an oak; by what laws the rain falls, and the tempest rages, we are as ignorant, as we are of the nature and essence of the Deity. Man is indeed a mystery to himself. Who can tell what or where is the principle of life within him? who can account for the origin or the effects of his own will? It were as easy to illustrate the most obnoxious doctrine of our religion, as to explain by what power we direct the eye to its object, or guide the hand in its operations.

It is remarked by Origen, that if the scriptures be supposed to proceed from him who made the world, we may reasonably expect to find as great difficulties in them, as are found in the constitution and course of nature. And it cannot be shewn to be either more necessary, or more possible, for us, in our present state, to comprehend all the doctrines of the Christian revelation, than to understand all the truths of natural philosophy.

Of the phenomena of nature we have, indeed, the evidence of our own senses; and therefore cannot doubt their reality. But for the truth of the mysterious doctrines of our religion, because for the truth of the religion itself, we have only the testimony of those who were appointed to be its witnesses; and therefore can obtain only belief. But the principle under consideration is common to both. In each we admit the truth of what we do not understand.

7. It is yet further to be remarked with respect to what we term mysteries in our religion; that they are such only with refer-

rence to our understanding. To us that is difficult, which we cannot perform; that may be considered as mysterious, which we cannot comprehend. But the mystery and the difficulty are not absolute, but relative. To an infant every appearance of nature, and every performance of art, were he disposed to examine them, would be abstruse and incomprehensible. To a mind more mature, if unimproved by literature and science, a few superficial facts may be known; but causes and principles are beyond its reach and its capacity. The philosopher penetrates a little farther; and many things are clear to him, which to mankind in general are unintelligible, and almost incredible. But his enquiries soon find the boundaries which they cannot pass. By angels and spirits we may reasonably suppose still more is understood. Yet we cannot doubt but even to them are opposed new mysteries and difficulties; depths, which they cannot fathom; clouds and darknesses, through which they are not permitted to penetrate. We too, in our future state of existence, shall probably be allowed to acquire much higher degrees of information, than we now possess. If we

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attain to the resurrection of the just, our faculties, we have reason to believe, will be enlarged as well as purified; and what now seems most mysterious in our religion, may appear, as no doubt it is, equally just, benevolent, and wise. Part of the happiness of the blessed may consist in a perpetual progress in knowledge and purity; in a continual approximation to the fountain of wisdom and perfection. *We now see through a glass darkly, and know in part; but then shall we know, even as we are known.* Instead then of murmuring at mysteries; instead of rejecting Christianity, because they form a part of it; we should recollect, that it is only our curiosity that is disappointed; our vanity that is mortified. It is not so much that doctrines are difficult, as that we are weak and unreasonable: and our complaints do not so much make an objection to the credibility of revelation, as an imputation to the wisdom or goodness of our Creator, for not having endowed us with more enlarged capacities.

8. It ought again to be a source of satisfaction to us, with respect to the mysterious doctrines

doctrines of our religion, that we are not required to understand them. Reason is not, and cannot be, called upon to comprehend, what the author of reason has placed out of its reach. Our business is not so much with their explication, as their authenticity. It is our duty to enquire diligently whether they are contained in scripture: to consider them rather as questions of fact, than of science; whether, according to the rules of sound criticism, they are, or are not, the doctrines of divine revelation. If not, we cannot be under any obligation to receive them: but if they are, our duty is belief and acquiescence. By this means every man will be enabled to give the best possible reason for the faith or hope that is in him, the authority of the word of God. In order to reconcile these mysteries to our own minds, or the minds of others; in order to facilitate and extend the belief of Christianity; we endeavour to clear its difficulties, to shew the possibility, and therefore the credibility, of the doctrines we profess; presuming that such disquisitions are innocent, and hoping they may be useful. But where our investigations cannot advance; our faith does not

necessarily stop. We may believe the general truth, though we are not able to illustrate it in detail. Nor are we bound by the alternative, either to adopt a specific illustration, or wholly to reject the doctrine. Some latitude of interpretation must be allowed, on account of the abstruse nature of certain tenets of our religion, and our different degrees of intellect; for the interests of Christianity, and the tranquillity of the public. On this ground it is that in her articles of faith, and in her interpretation of points of doctrine, our church has usually employed very temperate and cautious language; very general and comprehensive terms. And this moderation is equally just and wise. Where points of faith are unnecessarily multiplied by detail, or limited by explanation, the sources of discord are multiplied in the same proportion: and what should have been directed to the promotion of union, inevitably augments the causes of separation. But with a reasonable and moderate, not to say, unavoidable, latitude, we hope the professors of the doctrines of our establishment may be increased in their numbers, without being diminished in the unity

of their faith; that they may live in the practice of charity towards each other, and in the hope of acceptance from their redeemer and judge.

9. It is well worthy of remark that of those, who object to the mysterious doctrines of our establishment, a large proportion consists of men, who content themselves with very lax and unsettled notions of Christianity in general; of men, who are attached to religion chiefly from motives of policy; who are sensible of its advantages to civil society; and therefore would in almost every country profess the established faith. Of these men a few confess that they esteem all religions equally good; as equally tending to secure decency and integrity of conduct, and the subjection and peace of the people. But the greater number prefer the Christian religion; because it teaches the purest morality, and enforces it by the most powerful sanctions. But they do not examine with care its evidence, its doctrines, or its duties. The ideas of a Creator, a providence, and a state of retribution, while merely general and superficial, have little mystery or difficulty; and

these men do not enter into a more minute investigation of their creed. But let an attempt be made to reduce these doctrines, and what will fairly and unavoidably follow from them, into specific and definite propositions; to explain them in detail; to reconcile them to the phenomena of nature, to the present state of men and morals, and to the acknowledged attributes of the Deity; and they will present difficulties not much less formidable than the most obnoxious in our articles of faith. In men of this description, then, it is not reasonable or candid to object to the credibility of mysteries, merely as such; to exclude from their system of belief, whatever they cannot comprehend.

10. It must be yet further observed, that they who determine not to believe in Christianity what they cannot comprehend, must reject what we conceive to be amongst its most valuable doctrines; several of those, indeed, which constitute not only its superiority over all other religions, but its very nature and essence; which tend most to establish its divine original, and even its importance to the salvation of mankind. Such
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men will exclude from their creed, for example, not only the mystery of the Holy Trinity, and of all divinity in the person of the redeemer; but even the important and essential doctrines also of atonement and grace. And if Christianity be once reduced by these means to the standard of our reason; if it be stripped of all that is supernatural and mysterious; it will become more difficult to maintain its derivation from heaven; because it will be difficult to find in it any use, character, or value, worthy of such an origin. It will then, indeed, be so much on the same scale with other institutions; and our Saviour will stand so much on a level with other teachers; that his dignity and his offices will be nearly lost; his claims to our admiration and gratitude will want their support; and most of the great purposes, for which he came into the world, rendered doubtful and suspicious.

11. Revelation would then indeed become liable to objections of a different kind. The same men, who profess to reject Christianity solely on account of its mysterious doctrines, would probably be among the first to reject

it, were no such doctrines found in the system: and alledge that too as the ground of their rejection. Were it possible that revelation could have been rendered in every respect level to our capacities; and were all its doctrines intelligible to our understandings; such men would be among the first to tell us, there was nothing in it worthy the interposition of the great Creator; nothing that bore the stamp and image of divinity; nothing but what it was credible and probable reason had invented; because nothing but what she was able to invent. Why refer us to heaven, they would say, for what could be effected upon earth? why suppose that to be the work of God, which might be the work of man? If our Saviour had only taught a system of morality somewhat better than had been taught before; or enforced it by sanctions a little more ingenious or powerful; it might have been allowed that he was indeed superior to every other human being; but not therefore more than human; that he had improved upon Solon or Socrates; but was not therefore a teacher come from God. Had his doctrines contained nothing more mysterious, than the properties of the triangle,

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angle, or the beauties of the Iliad; we should have been told that the truth of all this was credible without a prophecy or a miracle; credible, though no one *came down from heaven, or rose from the dead.*

In this objection, indeed, there would have been considerable weight. It might not have been easy to maintain that to be divine, which bore hardly any characteristic of divinity; that to be supernatural, to the production of which human nature was equal. The excellence of its morality will not alone prove the divine origin of the gospel. But we now find the case to be, what might reasonably have been expected. Revelation shews every where the traces of its author. It teaches plainly, what it is at present necessary for us to understand, and what human wisdom had never taught. But every thing beyond this, is beyond our comprehension. Our dependence, and our obligations, the rules of our conduct, and the terms of our salvation, are explicitly revealed. But the existence, the perfections, and the government of God, though every where asserted or recognised, are no where minutely explained.

plained. In the nature of the human soul we are not instructed; but what is enough for us to know, we are assured, that he who made it, made it for immortality. In the discharge of our duty we are promised, what is sufficient to stimulate our exertions and perseverance, the assistance of the holy spirit; but of the nature and degree of that assistance we are not informed. If we are to be brought to judgment for our thoughts, as well as our actions, for our faith, as well as our works, it is by him, *who searcheth the heart, and seeth in secret*. If atonement be made for our offences against the Almighty; it is by a sacrifice of adequate value, the sacrifice of the son of God.

12. It may yet further reconcile us to the mysteries of our religion, if we consider, that we shall be under the necessity of believing points equally mysterious, if we reject it. Let revelation be abandoned; and the theories of the atheist or the Deist must be adopted. If we embrace the cheerless system of the former; and deny not only the revelation, but the existence, of the Supreme Being; we shall soon find ourselves obliged to

to digest tenets as incomprehensible, as any articles of the Christian faith. The atheist believes the existence of the world without a Creator. If then he maintain, with one sect of philosophers, that it has continued from everlasting in nearly its present state; he believes that a perpetual succession of causes came into operation, without any first cause to give them existence and efficacy; and that arts and sciences, which are in continual progress, will attain in time to that excellence or perfection, to which they have not attained in eternity. If, with another sect of philosophers, he maintain that things came in time into their present form and order; he believes that all the marks of skill and design in the formation of the universe, the exquisite adaptation of every thing to its proper purpose, are purely accidental; that all the effects of wisdom may be produced without its existence; and that chance was once able to give birth to all these wonders; though it appears to have done nothing ever since. With these and other difficulties, so great and numerous, may the atheist be pressed; and the belief of them would be so unreasonable and unphilosophical; that it
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has been doubted whether the character really ever existed; and it is certain that very few have ever openly avowed it.

If, with the Deist, we admit a Creator, but deny a divine revelation; we shall again find ourselves entangled in inextricable perplexity. In the belief of a God, we believe little that we can comprehend, beyond the simple fact of his existence. Of a Being that had no beginning, and can have no end; of a Being that was not caused by any thing, and yet is himself the cause of every thing; of a Being that is present at all times, and in all places, and yet has no relation to time or place; of a Being, who cannot do evil, and yet is morally free; of such a Being we can form no definite conception; his nature and attributes the Deist is as unable to explain; as we are to illustrate the most mysterious articles in our creed. If the Deist believe that God created the world and immediately dismissed it from his care; that he gave to millions of living creature a capacity of pleasure and pain, but left their gratification to time and chance; that he suffers physical evil to deform his work, and
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moral corruption to debase it; then must he believe a Deity without moral attributes; a Deity with imperfections of power or of inclination. If again the Deist believe that the whole system of Judaism and Christianity is error and deception; that the lawgiver of the Hebrews and the supposed redeemer of the world have been able to impose on so large a portion of mankind, in the belief of their mission, their powers, and their doctrines; if he believe that all the phenomena of nature, which appear to confirm the truth of revelation, have been mistaken and misapplied; he surely holds opinions and tenets not less extraordinary and inexplicable, than those which he would reject as incredible. If the disciples of atheism and of deism do really believe all to which their principles fairly and inevitably lead, they surely have no reason to deride the professors of Christianity for too much facility in their belief; for admitting doctrines to be true, which cannot be scientifically explained: they cannot with any appearance of justice complain, if we retort their own charge upon them; and continue to assert the bigotry of a sceptic, and the credulity of an infidel.

13. It may now perhaps be objected, that by the principle and tendency of these observations reason is depressed and degraded; that she is deprived of her peculiar prerogative, to examine, determine, and direct; and reduced to the meaner office of submission and obedience; that she is made no longer the judge of the truth, but the slave of authority.

In the course of the disquisition the proper province of reason has in several points been defined or suggested; and a very few words more will suffice to shew that, in conjunction with revelation, she has still a very important task to perform; a task well suited to her nature and her powers; a task appointed by her Creator, and to which he seems to have intended she should be confined.

It is the business of reason to set before us the errors in opinion and the defects in practice, that have prevailed in the world; our want of sound principles of morality, and of just sentiments in theology; and thus to shew the use, the advantage, and the necessity of a divine revelation. But she goes beyond her

her province when she imagines, on one hand, that she could have discovered by her own efforts the truths that have been revealed; or when she raises objections to them, on the other; because they happen not to coincide with her notions of what is best; or to contain *some things hard to be understood.*

It is the business of reason to examine the pretensions of whatever professes itself to be a divine revelation; to scrutinize the evidence; and to distinguish authenticity from forgery, truth from falsehood. But when once the distinction is made; when once the word of God is ascertained; her duty is belief and acquiescence. She goes beyond her province, when she attempts to illustrate mysteries; or complains that they stand in need of illustration.

It is the business of reason to distinguish between objects of science, and objects of faith; to determine where demonstration ends, and testimony begins; to prove, what is capable of proof; but to receive with gratitude and submission, what she could not

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have discovered. She goes beyond her province, when she attempts to demonstrate, what does not admit demonstration; or on that account refuses assent, where competent testimony is produced.

It is the business of reason to illustrate the wisdom and utility of the precepts of divine revelation. For what the authority of the Creator has commanded, his goodness has generally enabled us to discover an adequate cause: and it is the business of reason to shew, that his injunctions are suited to our nature and situation; to reconcile us to obedience, by displaying its subserviency to our own interest and happiness; and to persuade us voluntarily to fulfil the duties, which authority might compel. But she goes beyond her province, when she attempts to investigate all the counsels of the Almighty; or cavils at doctrines or duties; because she cannot trace thoroughly their meaning, or their foundation, their necessity, or their use.

It is the business of reason, lastly, to explain and illustrate moral precepts; to apply general principles to every particular case;
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to decide between opposite interests and probabilities; and to regulate our whole conduct with a view to our final responsibility. But she goes beyond her province, when she supposes she could, by any exertion of her own powers, have discovered the true principles of moral duty, or sufficient sanctions to enforce them; when she rests their authority and obligation on any other foundation than the will and word of God.

Reason then is not degraded by revelation; but assisted and exalted. Her prerogative is not taken from her; but limited and ascertained. Sublimier and better objects are presented to her contemplation; and she is employed upon them with greater satisfaction, and to more beneficial purposes. Faith has not superseded reason; but reason is made the judge of the basis of faith. It is wholly contrary to sound reason, not to acquiesce in scientific demonstration; it is hardly less so, to refuse assent to competent testimony. And if mysterious doctrines are neither impossible in themselves, nor incompatible with a divine revelation; if they are traced by sound criticism in the word of
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God; and that is confirmed by evidence suited to the nature and importance of the object; then will it be neither rational nor innocent to refuse our assent to them: they cannot be a sufficient ground for separating from the religious establishment of our country; and still less, for rejecting Christianity itself. They will not, *in the day of the Lord*, excuse our disbelief of its truth, or our disobedience to its laws.

SERMON VI.

ON THE WANT OF UNIVERSALITY IN
THE PROMULGATION AND RECEPTION
OF THE CHRISTIAN REVELATION.

MARK xvi. 15.

*And he said unto them, go ye into all the world,
and preach the gospel to every creature.*

OF the preceding disquisitions it has been the principal purpose to maintain, that a divine revelation was necessary for the instruction, the virtue, and the happiness of mankind; and that it has accordingly been bestowed upon them. Should the arguments, that have been advanced, be considered as conclusive; should this revelation be allowed to have been as necessary, as it has been represented; an objection might then, with some plausibility be urged against the divine origin

of our religion, from the want of universality in its promulgation and reception. If Christianity be the revelation supposed, it has been often asked, why are not all men equally in possession, of what is to all of equal importance? Why, at least, has it not been every where offered? Why have not the disciples obeyed the injunction of their master; and *gone into all the world to preach the gospel to every creature?* If there be a supreme Being of such goodness, as to bestow a revelation upon his creatures; and of such justice, as to exclude all suspicion of partiality; how shall we admit that revelation to be his; by which alone, according to its own declarations, mankind can obtain salvation; but of which a comparatively small part of mankind only have heard; and which a proportion still smaller have believed? Is it not more reasonable to suppose, that a revelation really divine would have been as universally proclaimed, as it was universally necessary or beneficial? And that it would at the same time have been distinguished by such marks of truth and authenticity, as must have precluded any doubt upon the subject, and secured every where assent and obedience?

Is not, in short, the partial reception of Christianity in the world, a reasonable ground of objection to its credibility?

1. Before we proceed to a more direct answer to this objection, a few general observations may be made, which will at the same time diminish its force, and assist our reasoning on the subject.

The diffidence and the restrictions, which should govern all our disquisitions on the nature or the proceedings of the Deity, apply in their full force, and ought to have their full weight, on the subject before us; from its extent, its difficulty, and its importance.

It is undoubtedly just to suppose, that the Deity will always do what is wisest and best: but it is not just to suppose, that he must always do what we may conceive to be wise and good; or that he will always enable us to judge of it, when it has been done. We are too apt hastily to conclude that Christianity ought to have been promulgated equally to all mankind; and to suggest various expedients, by which, we imagine, this might

have been effected. Yet it is by no means certain, either that the Deity was bound to give this universality to his revelation ; or that any of those expedients were practicable in themselves, or sufficient for so important a purpose.

To reason as if it had been incumbent upon the Almighty to have given the strongest possible evidence to Christianity ; as if the proofs ought to have been so numerous and manifest, that neither negligence nor prejudice could withstand them ; this is to reason with little other grounds than what our own fancy has formed. Our investigations should be confined to the testimony that has been given ; whether it be sufficient to satisfy a candid enquirer ; and whether we shall be justified in rejecting the evidence we have ; only because we have not more.

It is no less inconclusive, than it is presumptuous, to form in our own minds certain notions and principles respecting the nature and attributes of the Deity ; and then to infer from them, against the evidence of facts, that he was bound in point of justice
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or necessity to effect every thing, to which our suppositions lead. That it was incumbent upon the Almighty to bestow all his blessings, and therefore the light of the gospel, equally upon all men, is a gratuitous assumption of our own, built upon this erroneous and dangerous basis: and were it well-founded, would make the Deity no longer the spontaneous author of his own blessings; but a passive instrument, directed by an overruling fatality. Instead of concluding that the Creator is bound to adopt any given mode of proceeding in the dispensation of his blessings, because it appears to us to be fit and right; it is much more rational to conclude that any given mode of proceeding is fit and right, because it has been adopted.

Observations, like these, are continually repeated; because they are continually necessary; to guard us against hastily raising objections, on account of what we conceive to be difficulties; and to assist such solutions of those difficulties, as may not of themselves fully satisfy the understanding. The present life appears to be a state of trial of the faculties of our minds, as well as of the merits of our actions; of our candour and humility,

our trust and resignation to the word of our Creator; as well as of their practical fruits, justice and benevolence to our fellow-creatures. It is the time of probation for our faith, as well as for our works.

But though we cannot pretend at all times, nor perhaps at any time, fully to account for the proceedings of providence; yet in what materially concerns ourselves, he has in his goodness generally enabled us to discover such reasons for his conduct, as may vindicate his own perfections, and satisfy reasonable minds; as may, if not amounting to demonstration and certainty, be at least a sufficient ground of faith and resignation. For the want of universality in the Christian revelation such causes may be assigned, as will acquit its author of partiality, and remove all objection on that ground to its credibility.

2. In the nature and circumstances of Christianity itself may be found many reasons for supposing the design to have been; not that its promulgation should be local and partial; but that the knowledge and advantages of it should be every where diffused;

fused; as they are every where of essential importance to human happiness. When we consider the preparation and solemnity, with which it was introduced; by the separation of the Jews from the rest of mankind; by the types and emblems in the law of Moses; by the series of prophets, and their miracles and predictions; and by the personal dignity of its immediate author: When we consider again its own essential character; its doctrines announcing the moral government of God; its precepts, evidently calculated to teach universal morality; and the eternal sanctions by which they are enforced; its positive institutions, enjoined upon all its followers; its obvious utility in the intercourse of life; the preternatural means employed for its propagation and establishment; and the express declarations of our Saviour and his apostles; we shall no longer doubt its being intended as an universal benefit and blessing; for the improvement and the salvation of all the sons of men. With these circumstances, indeed, the gainfayer fortifies his objection: but we consider them as constituting a strong probability, that his objection will one day be removed; that the
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light of revelation will in due season visit every country of the world. Why it has not yet effected its own beneficial purposes, will then be the only point in question: and it will not be difficult to shew, that this circumstance affords no reasonable ground to deny its being, what it professes itself to be, the gift of God to man.

3. That the Christian revelation has not been given to all men; or not given equally and immediately to all; ought not to be considered as an objection to its authenticity; unless it can destroy the value or the reality of many other of the best gifts of heaven, to find that they also are bestowed unequally and occasionally. The light and heat of the sun, and the rain and the dews of heaven, are confessedly the appointment and the gift of the great parent of the universe: and they are indispensably necessary, not only to our comfort and enjoyments; but to the subsistence of every part of the creation. Yet they are irregularly and partially distributed. They are at one time too scanty for their own purposes; and at another, pernicious by their excess. While one region is oppressed by the
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the scorching rays of a vertical sun; another, by his distance or obliquity, suffers all the severities of cold and darkness: and while the want or delay of the shower condemns one district to hopeless sterility; another is overwhelmed by the ravages of an inundation.

Reason itself, the supreme endowment of the human mind, is distributed to its possessors in very different proportions: and while one man seems hardly raised by his intellectual faculties above the beasts of the field; another appears to approach to the knowledge and illumination of angels. All the acquisitions of reason are, as might be expected, like the reason from which they proceed, unequal, local, and occasional. Our discoveries in art and science, and our improvements in civil policy, have not only been made in distant parts and distant periods of the world; but are at this day possessed in very different degrees by different nations and different individuals. All the personal advantages of health and strength; all the gifts of fortune; and all the enjoyments of life, are bestowed in very various proportions: but this
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does not diminish; for it probably augments, their value and their use; and ought not to diminish our gratitude or satisfaction. Nor is the variety of our endowments and capacities a more just ground of complaint against Providence, than the variety of his creatures in the world; that brutes are not equal to men, and men to angels.

Nature and revelation have this remarkable similitude: both bear strong traces of their divine origin; yet in both are found what appear to us irregularities and defects. Though both are evidently wise and good; yet we can easily conceive it possible that both might have been good and wise in a higher degree. But this is supposition only; and the essential attributes of the Deity should lead us to conclude that it cannot be well-founded. What reasons of wisdom or benevolence might induce the Creator to permit this irregularity in the promulgation of his gospel, is not now the question. Its existence cannot be doubted. But as long as the same irregularity is observable in many of the operations of nature; it can form no particular objection to the truth of revelation. If we
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were warranted in concluding, that Christianity is not the gift of heaven; because it is unequally imparted to mankind: the same irregularity must warrant the same conclusion with respect to human reason*: and on a principle not very dissimilar, the calamities of life might be adduced to prove, that life itself cannot be the gift of God.

4. Of the objection to the Christian revelation, from its want of universality, one principle feature has always been, that it was not communicated at a more early period of the world; that so many generations were suffered to pass away without any opportunity of knowing it; and consequently of profiting by its doctrines and its blessings.

The fact is certainly true; but the objection founded upon it seems to be by no means

* This argument is actually urged by Cotta in Cicero, *De Nat. Deor.* 3. 26 et seqq. Where he contends, that as reason by being abused has done so much mischief, mankind had been better without it; and that as right reason has been granted only to a few, it cannot be the gift of the gods to any. A remarkable instance to what wretched reasoning and false conclusions philosophy may be reduced, when not assisted by divine revelation.

unanswerable; and therefore not conclusive against the truth of the religion we profess. If the Christian revelation was intended for the instruction and benefit of mankind in general; it would naturally be given at the period most likely to answer its own purposes; when it was most probable the greatest numbers would embrace it; when it had the fairest chance to attain that universality, for which we contend it was designed.

They who complain that the Christian revelation was not imparted at a period sufficiently early, may repeat the complaint against every other period that can be named; till they have carried us back to the time when redemption first became necessary; to the hour when by the transgression of our first parents *sin entered the world, and death by sin*. But had the Redeemer then appeared upon earth, it is obvious that the great purposes of his appearance could not have been obtained; at least not in any mode similar to that which has been pursued. In a world inhabited only by a single family, how could he have taught, by his instruction or his example, the principles of good morals;

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or the relative duties of social life? Who could have been, on one hand, his hearers and disciples; and who, on the other, would have occasioned his sufferings; and condemned him to death? Who could have attested his miracles and his doctrines; or recorded them for the benefit of posterity?

There can be no doubt but our first parents received from divine instruction a knowledge of human duty. Yet this knowledge was, even before the flood, so far corrupted or lost, as to have ceased to answer the end for which it had been given. For it is expressly declared, that to punish this corruption or loss was the cause and intention of the deluge. Divine instruction was again communicated to the family that escaped the general calamity. But was soon almost obliterated in the heathen world; and too often abused or corrupted even amongst the Jews themselves. If then our Saviour had appeared either before the judgment of the flood, or within a few centuries after it; what could have preserved his doctrines and precepts from the fate of other divine communications? What could have secured the great purpose
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for which they were designed; their becoming the rule and law and salvation of all succeeding generations?

But supposing these difficulties surmounted; had Christianity been promulgated at an earlier period of the world, it must still have wanted, what constitutes an essential part of its evidence, the existence, the series, and the completion of the prophecies. Our Saviour could not have appealed, for the truth of his pretensions, to the records of the people amongst whom he should have appeared, before such records existed, or their credit was established. He could not have claimed their belief in him, on the ground of their belief in their own prophets: nor could we at this day have compared his character and his actions with the predictions that describe them: we could not have supported the credit of the New Testament, on its conformity to the scriptures of the Jews.

Had the Redeemer appeared at an earlier period of the world, another species of evidence must have wanted much of its natural weight. The power of working miracles has

has always been considered as the proper test of a teacher come from God. But till the ordinary course of nature had been long and attentively observed; till it was known to be fixed, regular and uniform; its occasional interruption would have excited little surprize. The mighty works of the Saviour would hardly have been considered as miraculous. They would not have impressed themselves on the minds of men, as adequate evidence of divine authority; as unquestionable vouchers for supernatural truth.

Supposing again these additional difficulties removed; supposing the existence and completion of the prophecies; supposing his instructions delivered, his miracles admitted, and every other function of the Redeemer fulfilled; how were these things to be recorded and preserved for the information and advantage of posterity? Till an alphabet was invented, and introduced into general practice, the history and evidence of revelation; our rule of faith and conduct; the terms of our acceptance and salvation, could have been transmitted to us only by tradition. The gospel could have received

little support from any fixed and permanent records ; no confirmation from the notice of cotemporary authors ; from the hostilities of its enemies ; or the vindications of its friends. We have no indisputable evidence that the art of alphabetical writing was known, and certainly none that it was in general use, till some ages after the deluge : and how the gospel could by tradition only for more than twenty centuries have been preserved at all ; or if preserved, upon what principles it could have required and obtained attention and credit ; it is fortunately not incumbent upon us to determine. This difficulty presses upon those only, who think the Redeemer ought to have appeared, as soon as redemption became necessary ; that the Christian revelation should have been more nearly coeval with mankind.

Admitting, however, that even in this there was no difficulty ; admitting, what has indeed been maintained, that the signs of articulate sounds, as well as the power of uttering the sounds themselves ; that an alphabet, as well as a language, was given by revelation from heaven ; and admitting that
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it was given even to the earliest inhabitants of the earth; still at least one reason of considerable weight may be assigned for the delay in the promulgation of the gospel. It was of importance to the success of Christianity to postpone the publication of it, till its necessity should be apparent and confessed; till the general prevalence of idolatry, and a consequent corruption of morals equally general, should have made men sensible of their own inability to attain the knowledge of true religion; or to secure the performance of the moral and social duties; and therefore the more willing to receive, what promised to be of such essential service to both. It is true that the prepossessions and prejudices, the passions, opinions, and habits of the Gentiles, as well as of the Jews, at the time of our Saviour's appearance; prevented too many from paying attention to these considerations; to evidence of this nature in favour of the gospel. But to the candid and judicious of all succeeding generations, it has formed an argument of important use and efficacy. It has enabled us to compare the advantages of Christianity, with the evils it is calculated

to remove; to consider that as credible, which is so highly beneficial; to see that the Creator would probably give, what was so necessary to the happiness of his creatures.

These difficulties existed in their greatest force in the earliest periods of the world. Every century, as it passed, took away something from their weight: but they seem to have been completely removed only at the era, when the Redeemer actually appeared upon earth. That era was indeed distinguished by many important circumstances of its own, peculiarly favourable to the extensive propagation of the gospel.

The expectation of some mighty deliverer about this period had been very generally excited; not only amongst the people, *to whom were committed the oracles of God*; but throughout almost all the countries of the East. The prophecies had frequently and progressively announced such an event; and some of them in a good measure fixed the time of their own completion. The Jews had been repeatedly and widely dispersed amongst foreign nations. Their character

and manners, as well as their scriptures, had become extensively known: and these scriptures themselves had been translated into the language then studied by all, who aspired to the reputation of learning. Had revelation broken in abruptly upon mankind, without any such introduction and preparation, it might have excited more wonder than belief; it might have rather awed men into submission, than produced rational conviction. And had it been longer delayed, records and prophecies might have become obscure and questionable; and hope and expectation either been deluded by imposture; or languished of themselves, and sunk into heedless incredulity.

At this era too the Jews were in a situation the most favourable to the promulgation of Christianity. They were conquered, but not dispersed; subject to a foreign power; but still united as a nation; and with a few restrictions, in possession of their own polity and laws. By these means their records were preserved, and their worship tolerated; their civil power was regulated; and their whole conduct observed and known. Had they

been destroyed or dispersed; their history, their prophecies, and their typical ceremonies might have been destroyed or dispersed with them; and much of the best evidence of our religion weakened or lost: and had they been still unsubdued and independent, these circumstances would have been less speedily, less minutely, and less extensively known. They might have put the Saviour to death more early or more secretly; and their proceedings would not have been officially communicated by a Roman governor to his imperial master.

At this era again mankind enjoyed almost an universal peace. In the earliest ages of the world, its inhabitants were divided into petty communities, differing from each other in language, manners, interests, and superstitions; and were consequently in a state very unfavourable to the wide extension of information; to the propagation of a religion intended for their general reception and benefit. When larger monarchies were established, they were engaged in almost unceasing hostilities: for the great objects of their ambition and pursuit were military glory,

glory, and the extension of their dominions. But at the period under consideration, the Romans had become masters of the greatest part of the known world. All resistance had ceased; and mankind enjoyed the blessings of peace in return for their subjection. This left the minds of men at leisure to receive instruction; and the general intercourse between different countries facilitated its communication. Their previous progress in other arts and sciences had enabled them to comprehend what was taught on the subject of religion; to examine its evidence, and judge of its pretensions. Though the learning of the Romans was sometimes employed to oppose Christianity in argument, and their power to persecute its preachers; yet was it by this means brought forward to notice and attention; and, as in every other contest, the truth continued to gain ground; the wisdom of providence drew good out of evil; the propagation of his religion, from what was intended for its suppression.

Surely then the period of the appearance of the Redeemer, was better calculated than any

that went before it, to give success to his mission. What our scriptures call *the fulness of time*, was indeed the time most likely to give that universality to revelation, for which, we maintain, it was intended. As far therefore as the time alone is concerned, instead of forming an objection to the divine origin of the gospel; it is rather an argument in favour of its authenticity; it should prove, not the failure of its purpose, but the wisdom of its author*. Why this period, with all its advantages, has not hitherto been the means of diffusing revelation universally, remains yet to be enquired.

5. It is in the first place to be observed, that Christianity is not yet universally diffused; because it appears to be only in its progress

* That Christ did not appear more early upon earth is not, it might be observed, independently of other circumstances, an objection to the reality or the design of his appearance; any more than it is an objection to the reality or the advantages of the voyage of Columbus; that it was not made by Hanno or Eudoxus. The truth of Christianity is not more affected by the time of its promulgation to the world; than the discoveries of Newton are invalidated; because they were not made by Archimedes or Pythagoras.

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towards what, we suppose, will be its ultimate establishment. That the communication of religious knowledge to the Jews was gradual and progressive; and that each portion opened the way for the introduction of the next; till they were at length fully prepared for the reception of our Saviour and his gospel, has been repeatedly shewn by the advocates of revelation; and, as far as the mode of proceeding only is concerned, not denied by its adversaries: and that the progress of Christianity since has been in like manner gradual and occasional, its own history will abundantly testify. The gospel was at first published to the world by its author alone. It was then propagated by a small and select number of his disciples and apostles: and a considerable time elapsed before it spread beyond the limits of a single nation; of no great extent, power, or celebrity. Amongst the Gentiles afterwards its progress was still slow and gradual; beginning with single churches, collected by single apostles; till time and circumstances gave it importance and extension. During its infancy indeed it was supported by preternatural assistance; by the power of working miracles, and the advantages

advantages of inspiration granted to its preachers; and by whatever else was necessary, of the peculiar care and protection of providence. But when its followers had in various nations become numerous, and were formed into regular societies; when its history, its doctrines, and its precepts had been fixed in permanent records, to which on all occasions the necessary appeals could be made; it was then that the visible interposition of heaven was withdrawn; and the religion left to make its way by human and ordinary means; by the force of its evidence, and the value of its doctrines; by the utility of its precepts, and the talents and diligence of its teachers; assisted only by such protection from providence, as we believe him always to bestow on his own blessings, for the benefit of his creatures,

The progress of revelation therefore must now be expected to resemble that of every other acquisition, which heaven allows mankind to make: and the design of the Almighty seems to be, that every improvement should be gradual and progressive; the joint effect of his providence and our own exertions.

tions. Mankind have obtained their knowledge, not by systems, but by portions; not by intuition and illumination, but by continued application and study. Every art and science has been extended by degrees; as men became capable of making new discoveries themselves; or of receiving and relishing them, when made by more successful students. It is true that circumstances peculiarly unfavourable have sometimes retarded improvement on one hand; or men of extraordinary talents advanced it suddenly and rapidly, on the other; that one nation has stood still or lost ground, while another has made its most important acquisitions; yet still the progress in general has continued: almost every age has availed itself of the discoveries already made; and added something to the knowledge of those that went before it. It is indeed only by one acquisition that men become capable of another. Had many of our modern improvements in art and science; had our discoveries in chymistry, navigation, or astronomy been offered to the early inhabitants of the earth; they could not have been benefited; for they could not have understood what was offered.

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They would probably have either derided them as the artifices of imposture; or dreaded them as the productions of the powers of magic; but they certainly could not have applied them to the purposes of life.

That it was indeed the design of providence, that Christianity should be gradually diffused amongst mankind, not only appears from its history; but seems to be pointed out in the illustrations employed by our Saviour himself. He compares his gospel to *a seed, that while he, who cast it into the ground, should sleep and rise night and day, would spring and grow up, he knoweth not how; till the fruit was brought forth.* He tells us that the kingdom of heaven is like to *a grain of mustard seed; which, though the smallest of all seeds, is when grown the greatest among herbs; and the birds of the air come and lodge in its branches: that it is a little leaven hid in three measures of meal, till the whole be leavened.*

It is from considerations like these, we conclude, that providence bestows all his blessings at such times and in such proportions,

as are best suited to our previous attainments, and present circumstances; when we are best prepared to profit by his mercies. We should always consider, not only what it may be fit for him to bestow; but for us to receive; not merely what it is possible for an all-perfect Being to do; but what can be done with advantage for beings every way imperfect like ourselves. It is thus, then, that revelation, like every other blessing, has been given. And that Christianity is not yet every where known, or has not every where produced its full effects, cannot alone be a sufficient reason for rejecting it: unless we should be justified in rejecting our present acquisitions in art and science, because they are not yet brought to perfection; or not yet universally taught and adopted.

6. In opposition to this reasoning it may be urged that from the peculiar nature of revelation; from its superior value and superior necessity; it might have been expected to have been distinguished in its progress from sciences merely human; and to have been communicated universally and effectually. That the progress of Christianity ought to have

have been distinguished from the progress of science in general, may very safely be admitted: for it has been abundantly so distinguished. Not to dwell on the detail of more minute circumstances; the completion of prophecies, and the working of miracles, during its introduction and its infancy, were surely distinctions every way worthy of *the wisdom from above*. But with respect to its being universally and effectually communicated, one important question will be, in what manner this could be effected.

The method, which our scriptures inform us was pursued, for communicating revelation to mankind, was such as might naturally have been expected: to impart it first to agents selected for the purpose; and to authorise them to instruct the world at large; furnishing them at the same time with credentials sufficient, not only to convince the judgment of the candid enquirer; but to engage his affections in its favour.

To this plan of proceeding, however, on account of its supposed inefficacy, the objection has been made; and two others, and, I think,

think, two only, entitled to notice, have been suggested. The first to impress the truths of Christianity by divine inspiration so forcibly upon the mind of each individual; that they shall become the constant and unerring guide of his sentiments and conduct: the other, to publish its doctrines, and produce its evidence, as often as may be required; whenever scepticism or infidelity shall oppose it. It does not seem difficult to shew, however, that both these methods are less eligible than that which they would supplant; that they are liable to greater inconveniences, than those which they profess to prevent or remove.

If the former of these methods were pursued; the inspiration or impulse upon the mind of each individual, would either be irresistible, or it would not. If it were irresistible, it would immediately take away all our freedom of will and action; and consequently destroy all the distinctions between obedience and transgression, and all the equity of punishment or reward. It must indeed reduce the man to a state of mechanism; and confound the whole system of the religion, which it is intended to propagate.

If it were not irresistible; it might fail to be efficacious. If we retained under it the full exercise of our faculties; if we remained at liberty to obey or to neglect it; this would leave us in our faith and obedience, just where we are at present. With respect to the obligation upon the mind of the individual, it would be no way preferable to the plan that has been adopted; and with respect to the public, it would be exposed to much greater inconveniencies. As there would be no fixed standard of truth; no universal rule of conduct; no acknowledged authority, to which appeals could be made; there would be no criterion, by which the errors of ignorance could be corrected; or the extravagancies of enthusiasm restrained; by which the pretensions of the hypocrite could be tried; or peace and uniformity preserved in faith or worship, principle or practice.

Were the second method pursued, it would probably soon disappoint its own purposes. Were miracles, the proper evidence of a divine revelation, to be repeated, as often as doubt or infidelity might require, they would soon cease to excite wonder or attention; they

they would soon cease to be considered as preternatural; and therefore as a sufficient testimony of preternatural truth. When our Saviour with a few loaves fed a numerous multitude, they believed without hesitation that the food had been miraculously multiplied; for they immediately exclaimed; *this is of a truth, that prophet that should come into the world.* But we, who are constantly fed by a multiplication of the fruits of the earth equally wonderful, behold it without surprise or emotion; with little reflection upon the power or goodness of him who gives it. Yet the principal difference seems to be, that the former miracle was single and occasional; and that the latter is annual and familiar. The former was a sensible deviation from the established order of things; the latter was ordained at the creation of the world; and is continued by the fixed laws of nature. The comparison, however, is sufficient to shew what would be the probable consequence of our greater familiarity with miracles. Their effect would soon be wholly lost; and instead of spreading revelation more widely, or establishing it more firmly; every repetition of them would weaken its best testimony;

and leave it at last without any decisive evidence whatever.

These methods, then, and probably all others that could be devised, appear less eligible than that which has been pursued: and it should not in candour be urged as an objection to the truth of our religion, that the plan adopted for its propagation, has not yet produced any other effects, than those which might naturally have been expected.

7. Supposing, however, that by either of these methods, or by any other that can be suggested, the truth of revelation were irresistibly impressed upon the human mind; it might be attended with such effects, as would in a great measure disappoint its own purposes. Were our belief of a future state, by intuition, by inspiration, by continual miracles, or by any other means whatever, improved into indisputable certainty; the impression might be too strong for due attention to the duties of the present life. It must greatly restrain, if it did not destroy, our freedom of thought and choice. It would in no small degree confound the distinctions of charac-

character; by awing all dispositions into silence and submission. Above all, it might so wholly engross our minds, as to supersede worldly attachments, and all the usual incitements to industry; as to withdraw our attention from the progress of human affairs, and the claims of civil society. Men might be too much engaged with the prospects of futurity; and too little with the cares and offices of life: meditation and devotion might fill their thoughts and their hours; and the plough and the loom be suffered to stand still. It is not possible to pronounce with certainty on the consequences of any state of things, of which we have had no experience. But that something like what has been stated would be the effect of the system supposed, is neither improbable in itself, nor wholly without evidence to support it. St. Paul had frequent occasion to call back his converts to the ordinary duties of their respective stations: and we are told that *all who believed were together, and had all things in common; and sold their possessions and goods; and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat*

their meat with gladness and singleness of heart. This seems nothing more than what might naturally be expected, while the miracles of the apostles were immediately before their eyes: nor was it impracticable or ruinous in a small society, surrounded, and consequently protected, by a larger community. But were such sentiments and conduct to become permanent and general; the human character and human society must assume a new form; and it is by no means clear that the necessary arts of life would be cultivated and supported. It is the hope of terrestrial advantages; the love of riches or distinction; the prospect of future ease and indulgence; it is, in one word, the incitement of our passions, that prompts us to action and exertion; that sometimes indeed impels men to vice; but which at the same time gives exercise to all our virtues; which provides for our subsistence and enjoyment; and in a great measure constitutes that probation of disposition and conduct, which revelation assures us was intended by our Creator. As Christianity is now offered to our acceptance, room is left for these incitements and their effects: sufficient motives to temporal interest are compatible with due attention

tention to the injunctions of religion. And it ought not to be made an objection to the truth of revelation; that it does not compel, where it professes only to persuade; that some have not embraced, what all are at liberty to refuse.

8. With this gradual and progressive advancement of revelation others again are still dissatisfied; because it is not more regular and rapid; because it seems, that not only a length of time beyond all calculation will be required to give it that universality, for which we maintain it is intended; but that the dissolution of the world itself is an event much more probable, than the universal establishment of the gospel.*

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* It has been observed, that as the world at large, like every individual, has had its infancy and its growth; it will, like them, have also its old age and decline; and that it is much more probable such decline is approaching; than that yet greater improvements in science and virtue are to be expected.

In support of this notion it has been further observed, that periods of time somewhat similar elapsed between the creation and the deluge; between the deluge and the birth of Christ; and between the birth of Christ and the present day. And it is supposed from thence, that we are now prob-

That the world is to be considered as verging towards its decline, is so far from being admitted, that the contrary, it is thought, may be much more plausibly maintained. Many objects in nature, and almost every circumstance in human life, may lead us to

bably again on the eve of some mighty change in the order of things; perhaps the dissolution of the world.

With respect to this calculation on the similar periods of time, it appears altogether fanciful and visionary; and it is attempted to be thrown above, that so far from the world's being probably on the decline, the probability is much stronger on the other side.

With respect to the comparison between mankind in general and an individual; it by no means follows that because a resemblance has been discovered in some particulars, it must therefore hold good in all. A fanciful illustration is not a conclusive argument. The human frame in an individual cannot be preserved in its vigour beyond a certain period; it can by no art be secured against decay and dissolution. But the human race is in a great degree renewed by every new generation; and for any thing we can discover to the contrary, is capable of being renewed without end. That the human race indeed have, figuratively at least, had their infancy and their growth, like an individual, is certainly true; and it is possible they may have their maturity and decay. But before it can be rendered probable that such decay is approaching, it must be proved that they have already reached their maturity: and that is the very point in question.

suppose, that we are yet in the earlier stages of progressive advancement. Many fertile regions of the globe are yet imperfectly cultivated; and many are wholly devoid of cultivation or inhabitants. Yet if we believe the Creator to have made nothing in vain, and reflect upon the past or present transactions of mankind, we shall see abundant reason to expect that these vacancies in nature will one day be filled, and these solitudes swarm with population. It is not less rational, than it is pleasing, to suppose, that the den of the beast of prey will at some future period give place to the dwelling of the husbandman; and the marsh and the forest hereafter exhibit only fields covered with the harvest, and plantations smiling with the olive and the grape.

But the clearest and best evidence is to be drawn from the state and progress of art and science. This consideration has often been adduced to prove that the world had a Creator and a beginning: and it may be again adduced to shew how improbable it is, that it should soon have an end. Many of our most important advances in various departments of science are but of a modern date. Not to

dwell upon our greater dexterity in all manual operations; and the consequent improvement of whatever depends upon them: not to specify what is minute or questionable; some of the most valuable discoveries in medicine have been but lately introduced amongst us: the compass of the mariner, by which the intercourse of mankind is so essentially assisted, has been known but a few centuries: and at a still later period the art was invented, by which all other arts are best supported. Whatever is known in one country, we have now the means of transmitting to others with accuracy as well as facility. Whatever advances in science each generation shall be able to make; the art of printing will preserve for the benefit of the most distant posterity.

That such arts as these have hitherto been in progress, not only renders it probable that they will continue to make still further and more rapid advances; but it leads us to conclude, that the Deity would not grant such improvements to be abortive and useless. Is it credible, under the dispensations of a wise and good providence, that the most valuable arts should become known to the world, only when
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the world was on the verge of dissolution? That a few individuals of a few nations should be mocked with discoveries, the good effects of which neither themselves nor their posterity should survive to enjoy? Is it not much more rational to suppose, that these improvements will one day be carried to a much greater height; and extended to all the nations of the earth? that the blessings of civilization will not only reach the naked and houseless savage; but cheer the future inhabitants of countries yet unknown? that the sun of science will one day illuminate the remotest regions of the habitable world*?

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* It must be acknowledged indeed, that as arts and sciences are calculated principally for the purposes of the present life, and for the use of creatures destined to a future and better state of existence; their progress and perfection here cannot be shewn to be indispensably necessary, either for the enjoyments of mankind, or the vindication of the attributes of the Deity. This consideration, therefore, will not alone ensure to us the protracted duration of the present system of nature and the world. But as they appear to be in these times, not only in a state of improvement, but improving more rapidly than at any former period; as these gradual advances are agreeable to our best notions of the general proceedings of providence; and as they seem likely, not only to furnish greater enjoyment to a greater number

In conjunction with general science, will probably be diffused the knowledge and blessings of the gospel. Its progress, no doubt, as it has hitherto been, will be often interrupted. From the influence of local and temporary circumstances, it will appear sometimes to stand still; and sometimes perhaps to lose ground. But still, we trust, it will on the whole continue to advance; and that it will finally triumph over all opposition, its own predictions teach us to expect. It is true that, as far as we are able to judge, many centuries must elapse before these happy events can take place. A length of time will be required for their completion; of which we can form no probable conjecture or calculation. But let us not be deceived by the narrowness of our comprehension or

number of individuals in the present life, but to enable men to deserve and to receive superior degrees of happiness and glory in the life to come; it is more reasonable to suppose they will yet long be permitted to proceed, than that they should be soon or suddenly stopped. The prospect and the practicability of their further advancement is surely presumptive evidence of the opinion it is adduced to support; that the world is in its progress, not in its decline; that its future duration will probably be much greater than the past.

our nature. To us, weak and short-lived as we are, a few years appear lasting and important. All our interest, our influence, and our pursuits, are confined within a very limited extent both of time and space. But with the Almighty proximity and distance, present and future almost lose their distinctions. With him, *one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.* Of the plan of Providence a small part only appears to be yet accomplished. The time the world has yet existed is probably but a moment, in comparison of the time it must yet continue. The numbers of men, therefore, that have been born and died without the knowledge of the gospel, will be in no proportion, that we can calculate, to the numbers that shall hereafter enjoy its light. In the lapse of ages the day will probably come, when the Redeemer shall be thought to have appeared, not in the decline, but in the infancy of the world; when the objection shall be, if objection still continue to be made, not that he appeared at too late, but at too early a period; not that too many generations were suffered to pass away before the promulgation of Christianity; but that

too many have since elapsed; till the evidence cannot be so traced as to give conviction and satisfaction. The truth is, that if it was necessary the Redeemer should appear upon earth; he must appear at some given time. The time, at which he did appear, has been already shewn to have been in the highest degree suitable and seasonable; and till a period more seasonable can be pointed out, our objections on that ground will have as little weight, as they have candour or piety.

9. But admitting this hypothesis to be just in its fullest extent; another difficulty will still remain: if the blessings of the Christian revelation are one day to become universal; as indeed the attributes of the Deity warrant our believing; it may still be enquired; how those men are to be benefited by it, who lived and died before its publication to the world; or who at this day are born and die, without any opportunity of knowing it.

The nations not blessed with the light of the gospel, we suppose, will be judged hereafter according to what they know, or might have

have known; according to the use they have made of the faculties with which they are endowed; and of their acquaintance with religion; in whatever degree, and from whatever source, they may have obtained it. And to them may be extended the benefits of redemption; though the knowledge of it has not reached them. Our Saviour is represented in scripture as the price, the sacrifice, the satisfaction, the propitiation, and the atonement, for the sins of men. But in what sense precisely these expressions are to be understood; in what this atonement particularly consists; the scriptures have no where explicitly declared; nor is it necessary to the present purpose to determine. If reconciliation to the divine favour be procured for us by the incarnation and death of Christ, whatever be the mode or principle by which it is obtained; the benefit, it is obvious, may be extended to mankind in general; not only to those who know and profess the doctrines of the gospel; but to those also, *who cannot believe in him of whom they have not heard, and who could not hear without a preacher.* Upon what terms, or in what proportion, the

the blessings of redemption may be granted to those, who neither claim them by typical sacrifices, like the Jew, nor by faith and prayer, like the Christian, it is impossible for us to decide; and therefore useless to enquire. But unto whomsoever much is given; of him, we know, much will be required; and of course less will be required of him, to whom less has been given. The benefit of the atonement may reasonably be expected to be as extensive, as the effect of transgression: and *as in Adam all die; even so in Christ shall all be made alive.*

In this account of the benefit and efficacy of redemption it has always appeared to me that the mind might reasonably acquiesce; and it is certainly entitled to very serious attention. If it be just; it not only answers decisively the objection to Christianity from its want of universality; but removes some other important difficulties on the subject. It acquits Providence of that partiality, which has been charged upon the Christian dispensation. It refutes all objection with respect to the time of the Saviour's appearance
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in the world: because if expiation be made by the sacrifice of his death; its efficacy cannot be affected by the time at which it is offered: and it reconciles us to the doctrine of atonement, by the value of the sacrifice; by the sufficiency of the satisfaction. It forms an argument of no inconsiderable weight against the heresy of the Socinians; as it implies the dignity and the divinity in the person of the Redeemer. It may illustrate several important points, which are continually asserted or implied in the language of scripture: that the nature of sin is not reconcilable to the nature of God: that the transgression of the divine law required some expiation, before it could be forgiven: that justice must have some satisfaction, before mercy could take place; or that our offences could not be pardoned, till they were rendered pardonable by the sacrifice of Christ: that Jesus Christ is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world; and that there is none other name under heaven given to men, whereby they may be saved. To this account too perhaps less can be objected than to any other: and an interpretation of a
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point so interesting and important, which removes so many difficulties, and is itself liable to so few, has a peculiar claim to our attention and consideration. It offers as well peace to our scruples, as conviction to our understanding.

If then there be any foundation for the opinions that have been advanced; if there be any weight in the considerations that have been offered; no solid objection to the truth of Christianity can be founded on the present and apparent want of universality in its promulgation and reception. If the frailty and the fall of human nature were foreseen; and the scheme of redemption at the same time adopted as the remedy: if the will and laws of God were revealed at successive periods of time, as men were in a condition to profit by the revelation; if the communications to Adam and to the patriarchs, to Moses and to the prophets, were not temporary and occasional expedients; but parts of one general plan; originally chosen and regularly pursued: if the appearance of Jesus Christ upon earth was the end and com-

completion, of what the former communications had been only the preparation and the beginning: if the light and knowledge of this revelation have been hitherto in their progress, and will in due season extend as far as human nature is extended: if finally, according to the language of the apostle, *the lamb was slain from the beginning of the world; and having appeared once, hath put away sin by the sacrifice of himself*; then surely is the dispensation of the gospel every way worthy of its author: the work of the redemption of man must appear even in our eyes suitable to the wisdom and goodness of him that made him; as magnificent in its design, as beneficial in its effects. Instead of raising objections to the authenticity of the Christian revelation; because it has not been communicated to others; we should learn to be grateful to the mercy which has bestowed it upon ourselves. It has perhaps been left unfinished, to give us the merit of doing, what appears to be our duty; of contributing to its extension and universality by our instruction and our example. Where we cannot have the gratification of understanding

the mysteries of providence; let us at least have the virtue of resignation: and not waste in too curious enquiry into points we cannot ascertain, those hours, which ought to be employed in studying to obtain the promises of God by obedience to his laws.

SERMON VII.

ON PRAYER.

JOB xxi. 15.

What is the Almighty, that we should serve him? And what profit shall we have, if we pray unto him?

TO all who believe in the existence and providence of a Supreme Being, the truest and firmest foundation of moral and religious duty is the will of God: and when his will is once known, we confess our part to be submission and obedience. Whether the commands of our almighty governor had appeared easy or severe; whether we could, or could not, have discovered in them any wisdom, fitness, or utility; still we should have been bound to perform what he had enjoined. His authority alone, when once admitted, is

indisputable obligation. In prescribing laws for our conduct, however, he has seldom exerted this authority, without having at the same time enabled us to discover satisfactory reasons for the exertion. The precepts, which he has delivered, we can generally perceive to be well suited to our nature and situation; to be wisely calculated, in most cases, to promote the immediate advantage of the individual and of society; and in every instance, to secure those future and more important blessings; which he has graciously promised, as the reward of virtue and piety in our present state. It is thus that his goodness softens the terrors of his power; and that we can submit with cheerfulness to the will of our Creator; when we know that submission is required only for our own good.

But though we are permitted to see in the commands of God, wisdom, benevolence, and utility every way worthy of himself; yet were it the highest presumption to suppose we could discover all the motives and principles, by which the Deity himself might be influenced when he gave them. And though
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we can perceive these excellencies in his commands in general; we are by no means allowed to perceive them equally in all. Some of the duties prescribed to us are so clearly just in their general principle; and the benefits resulting from the due discharge of them so great and obvious; that it has been supposed our obligation to perform them may admit scientific demonstration; and that they are duties independently of the will of God, and antecedently to his commands. But of others, the general principle has appeared so obscure, or the utility so questionable; that it has been doubted whether it was at all incumbent upon us to perform them; whether the supposed obligation was not wholly either the contrivance of policy, or the error of superstition. Under the former description has been included the greater part of the moral virtues: under the latter, many of the offices of devotion; and especially, the act of prayer. The propriety of the use of prayer has been sometimes doubted even by wise and good men; because doubts have been entertained by them respecting its efficacy and success: and by some of the adversaries of religion, this

propriety has been wholly denied: because, as they maintain, no rational cause can be assigned, why prayer should procure for us any advantages, which without it we might not equally hope to obtain.

With a view to remove such doubts, and to invalidate such an objection, it is proposed; first to state concisely the general advantages of prayer; and then to enquire what grounds we have to hope for its efficacy and success. To which I shall beg leave to add a few observations on the propriety of public or social prayer; and on prayer in precomposed and prescribed forms.

1. If we understand the term prayer in its more comprehensive sense, as equivalent to religious worship; as including our praises and thanksgivings, as well as our petitions, to the Deity; it will be found to possess some obvious and important recommendations.

Religious worship, or the homage of prayer and praise, seems naturally and reasonably due from the creature to his Creator. That we are unequal to the supply of our
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own wants; that we neither know what would constitute our happiness, nor how to pursue it when known; that we are ignorant, weak, and dependent; has always been acknowledged by philosophers, as well as by divines: it is a truth, no less the result of our own experience, than the dictate of divine revelation. When we reflect for how many blessings we are already indebted to the Almighty, and how many more we still expect to receive at his hands; and which without his protection and permission we can never hope to obtain; to be impressed with sentiments of gratitude and veneration towards him, is equally consonant to the feelings of the heart and the deductions of the understanding. When we reflect again upon his wisdom and purity, his power and justice, contrasted with our own errors in opinion and offences in practice; it is impossible not to feel apprehension and alarm; not to fear his displeasure and condemnation; not to aspire after his approbation and favour.

Towards our fellow-creatures when invested with grandeur and authority, and still more, if we are indebted to them for protection

tection and kindness, it is always expected that we should feel, and that we should express, respect and gratitude: and to be deficient in these sentiments, and to refuse or neglect the expression of them, is always considered as the criterion of a corrupt heart. It is not mentioned but in terms of contempt or detestation. Towards our Creator then, to whom our obligations are so incomparably more important; and whose future favour is so infinitely more valuable to us; no man, who believes his existence and his providence, will forget to be thankful for what has been received, and to petition for what his circumstances may require. To this indeed, and in the changes and chances of life to repose our confidence in some superior power; to desire, to solicit, and to hope for his protection, the propensity is so strong and so universal, that it has been supposed to be involuntary and instinctive; not so much the result of observation and reasoning, as the stamp and impression of nature. That worship and homage should be paid to the great parent of the universe; that each of the divine attributes should produce a correspondent affection in the human mind; that his
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justice should excite our fear, and his mercy our hope: that his benevolence should conciliate our love; and his truth support our trust and confidence; this again has been supposed to be as natural in itself, as that physical effects should follow from their respective causes: it has been maintained to possess a fitness and harmony, analogous to that which subsists between the premises and the conclusion in the theorems of mathematical science. And these sentiments of the heart, though they should never be expressed in the language of the lips, are praise, gratitude, and prayer.

If the devotion of the heart and the influence of religious principle upon the conduct be necessary, religious worship, or prayer, is equally necessary; because without the latter, the former cannot be supported. Conviction alone does not always influence practice; because it cannot always conquer the passions. Arguments, that seemed irresistible in retirement and solitude, are found of little avail, when we again mix in the business and temptations of the world. The heart must be gained. Sentiment and affection

tion must be brought to the aid of reason; and conviction strengthened by reflection and habit.

Such too is the constitution and the weakness of human nature, that whatever is not frequently and periodically brought to our recollection, is generally soon forgotten. Our capacities can retain only a limited number of ideas; and as new objects engage our attention, the old are necessarily neglected; and in a little time no more remembered. To this weakness, indeed, the heart is scarce less liable than the understanding. Not only the scholar is continually mortified by the want of what he has forgotten; but almost every man complains of the effects of time and absence, in the decay of natural affection, and in the failure of attachment in his friends.

Nor will the consequences of this weakness be any where more visible, or more to be lamented, than with respect to the impressions of religion. There are so many objects in the world, which are suited to the gratification of our senses, and which inflame our

passions by the prospect of indulgence, that if we do not carefully renew the influence of religious principle, it will probably be soon over-powered: and unless we renew it regularly and periodically, we shall not renew it with due care or sufficient effect. What we suppose may be done with equal convenience at any future time, we seldom do at present; and he who has no stated hour of prayer, it is to be feared, will soon cease to perform any offices of devotion. It is thus that in time we may lose, not only our habits of virtue, but our inclination to pursue it; that we shall either neglect what is due to our Creator and our fellow-creatures; or at least the principle, which we conceive to give it merit and value.

The probability, on the contrary, that due attention to the offices of religion will ensure the performance of our duties in general, will be another of its important recommendations. No two objects can be more opposite than prayer and sin; than rational devotion and deliberate transgression. They cannot exist together. There is no restraint upon the practice of vice so effectual,

tual, as the frequent and regular performance of the rites of devotion. No man, after the recent commission of a known sin, could ever address a prayer to heaven without a mixture of shame, and fear, and repentance: nor will any man, with his religious duties yet fresh in his memory, be easily persuaded to transgress the laws, which his religion has prescribed. If therefore our exercises of piety are so frequent, that no temptation can surprize us, but when one act of devotion is lately passed, or another approaching; we shall soon find ourselves on all occasions masters of our passions and our conduct. Every sentiment, indeed, which leads us to the act of prayer; or to the hope of success in our petitions; at the same time enforces the necessity of purity of heart and integrity of life. How can we pray to God for pardon of our sins, unless we resolve to forsake them? How can we implore his blessings, unless we endeavour to deserve them? The language of our scriptures speaks in unison with the best conclusions of our reason. *We know that God heareth not sinners; but if any man be a worshipper of God, and do his will, him he heareth.*

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From these effects of prayer may naturally result, according to our apprehension, one of its greatest recommendations, the probability of, what I have ventured to call, its efficacy and success; the probability, that it will procure for us the attention and favour of heaven; either the blessings, which we have presumed to solicit; or other advantages of equal value, and more adapted to our character and situation. If the regular and frequent repetition of our devotions possess the moral tendency that has been stated; if it so essentially contribute to *make us a clean heart, and to renew a right spirit within us*; then must it necessarily contribute to render us proper objects of the bounty of our Maker; to place us in a capacity to receive, what otherwise his wisdom or justice might have withheld. It is by no means intended to maintain that our God will grant us temporal blessings, only in proportion as we are found to deserve them. It is the exclusive prerogative of the Almighty often to bestow, before any claim of justice can be made; and always without an equivalent. He gave us life without any merit on our part; and he may still give what will render that life valu-

able and happy. Our piety and obedience may improve our claim to his favour; but they do not constitute the original foundation of that claim; nor can they of themselves ensure its success.

It must be observed too, that blessings delayed till we petition for them, best excite or preserve the sense of our dependence upon God; and when granted to our prayers at last, most effectually teach gratitude and obedience. The Almighty best knows the proper season for granting his mercies; when they are best suited to our circumstances; and when we are best prepared to profit by them. We may therefore continue to ask till he sees fit to bestow. He may with wisdom and justice grant to our repeated prayers, what he had denied to our first. It is thus that the consideration of the divine nature and our own may justify that perseverance in prayer, which our scriptures have enjoined; and teach us to hope for the efficacy, which they have promised.

If these notions of the nature and tendency of habitual devotion be well-founded,
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it will be attended also with another effect, which we conceive to be of the highest importance; it will render us capable of enjoying those blessings, which our religion has promised to all *who attain to the resurrection of the just*. That the true happiness, as well as dignity, of our nature consists, not in the gratification of our corporal and sensual appetites, but in the purity of our affections, and the improvement of our intellectual faculties, is the language of philosophy, as well as of religion; the doctrine of reason, as well as revelation: and the same corrupt passions, which are injurious alike to our innocence and our peace in the present life, will, we conceive, destroy our relish, as well as our claim, to the joys of the life to come. The sensualist could find no gratification, where all enjoyments are pure and spiritual; where the objects, which formerly engaged his affections and supported his pleasures, could no longer be found. The envious man, instead of comfort, would feel only an encrease of wretchedness. His misery is always augmented, in proportion as he is surrounded with happiness. They, on the contrary, who have learned to find pleasure
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in beholding the virtue and purity of others, as well as in the possession of their own; and whose habits of devotion have taught them to contemplate the perfections of the Deity, not only with reverence, but with delight; these alone are prepared, we believe, to enjoy the blessings of immortality, in the society of *the spirits of just men made perfect*. Misery, we suppose, to be the necessary consequence of guilt, as well as its punishment; and happiness the natural effect of innocence, as well as its reward. The language of our scriptures is, that *blessed are the pure in spirit; for they shall see God*.

Such are the general advantages which, we suppose, will result from the due discharge of the offices of devotion. But it may still be urged, that these are rather its adventitious and collateral benefits, than its direct and proper effects. These might be amongst the causes why divine worship has been prescribed as a duty by our religion; but they are not the actual motives on which the duty is performed. They are, at least, not the principle, on which prayer, properly so called, is addressed to heaven. The true and
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the obvious reason, why we offer our petitions to the Deity, undoubtedly is, that we hope they may be granted; that we trust they will procure for us such favours and blessings, as we should not otherwise have been permitted to obtain; and it is to this efficacy of prayer that the objection is made:

2. If, say the objectors, the Deity be, as he is represented, omniscient; he must know our necessities before we ask; and cannot become better acquainted with them by any information we can give him. If he be benevolent; he must be, from his own nature, as much disposed to prevent or to alleviate our distresses, as our solicitations can make him: and if he be immutable, our petitions cannot produce any change in his attributes, his government, or his laws. But even supposing it not inconsistent with the power or the will of God, to hear the reasonable supplications of his creatures; it cannot be possible for him to gratify at once the different and even contradictory petitions of different men; it cannot be expected that, in order to gratify them, he should continually violate those laws of nature, which he has himself

established: and that of any such violation, in consequence of our prayers, the only unequivocal testimony, our own experience, cannot be produced.

In the abstract this objection certainly appears very formidable; and perhaps the human understanding cannot furnish a decisive answer; an answer that shall completely remove the difficulty; and teach acquiescence by conviction. But what our weak and limited intellects do not fully comprehend, does not therefore imply absurdity, injustice, or impossibility. If we can offer such considerations as may satisfy our own minds, or the minds of others, that the duty, which we believe our Creator to have commanded, is reasonable in itself, and beneficial to mankind, we gain an important point; we perform an essential service to ourselves and to religion.

That the Deity knows our wants before we ask, cannot be denied; and that his benevolence inclines him to relieve them, will not be questioned. But still it may be required that something should be done on our

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part, in order to obtain what we ask; or what we should have asked, had we known, what is known to him; what on the whole is best and fittest for us. The Deity is generally understood to employ various means and instruments, to effect the beneficial purposes of his moral government of the world; and amongst these may, without absurdity, be supposed to be included our prayers and supplications. It may be essential to his goodness not to bestow his blessings indiscriminately and unconditionally; but under certain limitations required by his wisdom or his justice; and these limitations may augment the blessings themselves, or the enjoyments of him, on whom they are bestowed. All the general recommendations of piety and devotion, which have been already stated, may be so many indispensable qualifications for our receiving or profiting by such favours, as it is the object of our petitions to obtain. Our title to his benevolence may be, and indeed seems to be, not absolute, but conditional; it appears to be required that we should possess certain qualities, and perform certain duties, in pursuit of his mercies; before we are permitted to receive

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them. Such a principle seems to influence all the proceedings of the Deity with respect to his rational creatures. In such a principle, perhaps, the cause must be sought, why man was created with a capacity of doing evil, as well as good. He was not made certainly and necessarily virtuous and happy; because it was required by the attributes of his Creator, that he should be instrumental to his own happiness or misery, by his obedience or his transgressions. And it may be consistent with the divine wisdom, justice, or benevolence, to grant blessings to our prayers, which could not, consistently with those perfections, have been granted without them*.

* In the scriptures such a principle appears to be recognised. In the old testament obedience and blessings seem to be considered as inseparable. And when Ahab repented and humbled himself before God, the penalties, which had been threatened to his transgressions, were suspended. The Almighty *would not bring the evil in his days; but in his son's days would he bring the evil upon his house.* 1 Kings xxi. 29. See also Jonah iii. In the new testament, to the centurion, who entreated his assistance, our Saviour said, *as thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee.* Matt. viii. 13. and in his own country he did not many mighty works, because of their unbelief. Matt. xiii. 58.

That the nature and attributes of the Deity are in the strictest sense immutable, will not be questioned. But whether immutability in the same sense, and with the same strictness, is applicable to his moral government of the world, may reasonably be doubted. In every thing which admits a choice between right and wrong, the Deity must always do what is right: and in every thing, which admits degrees of good, we doubt not he will always do what is best. But we must be cautious how we limit his freedom or his power. And it seems no way inconsistent with the principles already allowed, that God in his dealings with men, should at all times adapt them to their nature and situation: that something should be made to depend upon the choice of creatures, to whom, as being responsible for their actions, freedom of choice must have been allowed: that a change in the disposition or the conduct of a moral agent, should produce a correspondent change in the treatment he receives from a moral governour: or that where the same beneficial purposes may be obtained by various means equally good, the preference should be given accord-

ing to our obedience, our penitence, or our devotion.

That the supplications of different men are sometimes absurd in themselves, and often inconsistent with each other, though it must be lamented, cannot be denied. But this circumstance cannot affect the general propriety or the efficacy of prayer. Every human duty will be sometimes weakly or negligently performed. But this makes no change in the nature of the duty itself; or in our obligation to perform it. It is always supposed, and in the very notion of prayer it is obviously implied, that the object of every petition is referred to the decision of him, to whom it is addressed; to be granted or denied, as his wisdom shall determine. The rational petitioner does not mean to dictate, but to entreat. He begs for what he conceives to be a blessing; and on the supposition that it is really such to himself, and not inconsistent either with the interests of his fellow-creatures, or the attributes of his Creator, hopes it may be granted to his supplications. The devout suppliant, indeed, of every persuasion, if he do not address the
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same object of worship, must be supposed to address him in the same spirit, as *the author and finisher of our faith*; he must conclude every prayer in the language of humility and resignation, *not as I will, but as thou wilt; not my will, but thine be done.*

That the Almighty will not for our sakes, or at our solicitation, interfere with those laws of the creation, which he has himself established, is more than we are bound to admit. That visible miracles are no longer vouchsafed to us, because their purpose is accomplished, we readily acknowledge. We acknowledge too, that the course of causes and effects in the world should not be frequently and openly disturbed; because a certain degree of confidence in the order and uniformity of nature is necessary to the well-being, and even to the subsistence, of mankind. But it is not therefore certain that those laws are immutable and eternal. There is no proof that when they were ordained, it was ordained also, that they should not for any cause, or on any occasion, be afterwards changed or suspended. The probability is, that the Creator would still reserve in his own

hands unlimited authority over his own creation. To our apprehension, indeed, this seems necessary; not only to his dignity and his benevolence; but to his moral government of the world. It is easy to conceive, and it is reasonable to suppose, that the winds and the sea may secretly obey him; that occasionally the sun may shine and the rain descend at his especial command; that the earthquake and the lightning may be sometimes directed to their object by his providence; and that each of these may become the instruments of our trial and probation; of reproof and chastisement to the impious and disobedient, and of favour and blessing to the just and good.

That we have no certain experience of any such interference with the laws of nature, in consequence of our supplications, must indeed be allowed; and we presume the want of it may be justified. Such experience, if allowed at all, must either be constant and universal, or limited and occasional. If not constant and universal, it does not appear that the objection in question would by any means be removed. If known and apparent instances of the efficacy of prayer ought only to be occasionally

caſionally allowed, for the inſtruction and encouragement of mankind in general; we maintain that ſuch inſtances are already recorded in our ſcriptures; and that he who is not ſatisfied with theſe, would probably remain without conviction, however the number might be enlarged. He indeed, who ſhould not obtain the experience in his own caſe, might ſtill diſpute its exiſtence in any other; or he might charge providence with injuſtice and partiality, in granting to other men, what was denied to him. He would ſtill be at liberty to urge every argument againſt ſuch efficacy, which can at preſent be urged againſt it; or to deny its reality on every principle, on which the truth of other miracles has ever been denied.

If, on the other hand, this experience were conſtant and univerſal; if it were aſcertained that ſucceſs would attend our prayers to heaven, with the ſame regularity that physical effects reſult from their reſpective cauſes; changes highly important in themſelves, and, as it ſhould ſeem, highly miſchievous in their conſequences, would be introduced into the ſyſtem of human life. Not
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to state how much the solemnity of prayer must be degraded and debased; not to insist on the confusion that must inevitably ensue; would not this certainty shake the very foundation, or change the very nature of our faith and resignation; of hope, of humility, and of every other sentiment, which constitutes piety or duty towards God? Would men continue to labour for their subsistence, if it could with equal certainty be procured by prayer? Who would toil through the mazes of science, or exert his own skill and diligence to escape danger and death, if prayer could equally purchase for him information or safety? Such regularity and certainty, indeed, in the efficacy of prayer, would not only be injurious to industry, to virtue, and to devotion; but would seem to take away all option from the Deity himself. It would not leave him in the dispensation of his own blessings, that exercise of his wisdom; which we believe to be necessary to his moral government, and essential to the perfection of his nature. Our prayers, then, may still be instrumental in procuring for us the favour and protection of the Almighty; though their efficacy is not confirmed by our own experience: and even the
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the obscurity respecting their influence, and the uncertainty of the event, may be more beneficial to ourselves, than a decided confidence in their success.

If these considerations, or any others that can be offered, will reconcile the efficacy of our prayers with the acknowledged attributes of him, to whom they are addressed; if any principles, that can be assumed, will shew that blessings may be granted to our petitions, which otherwise we could not have expected to obtain; then must the objection be considered as having received all the answer that ought to be required. This is probably all that the human understanding can effect. That our prayers will be efficacious, we must be content to learn from higher authority. If our reason can exculpate what we receive as a divine revelation, from the imputation of having enjoined a duty that is either useless or absurd; the precepts of revelation constitute in return a decisive obligation why the duty should be performed. The professors of every religion have admitted the propriety of prayer; and depended upon its influence with the object of their adoration: and Christians
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in particular are not only required, by the commands of their God, to apply to him in their wants and distresses; but they are encouraged in the application, as well by promises that their petitions will be accepted, as by recorded instances, *written for our learning*, in which such petitions have been efficacious and successful.

3. Supposing it admitted, however, that sufficient reasons may be assigned for the practice of private prayer; the propriety or the necessity of public worship may still be disputed. But public or social prayer may be defended or enforced on all the same grounds as private devotion; and as it possesses some additional advantages of its own, we shall be bound to the practice of it under additional obligations.

It ought to be considered as no light recommendation of public worship, that it has made a part of every known religion of the world. All civilized nations have had their temples, their altars, and their priests; their rites and ceremonies of religion, established and protected by public authority: and these prove
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not only the existence of social worship, but the esteem in which it was held; and the zeal and diligence, with which it was supported. How widely soever nations may have differed from each other in their religious opinions, and the articles of their faith; in this one point they have all agreed; that the people should assemble at certain places, and at stated seasons, for the purposes of general devotion; to unite in deprecating the displeasure of heaven for the transgression of its laws; in praises and thanksgivings for mercies received; and in supplications for blessings they desired. To those who maintain that all religion was derived originally from divine revelation, this unanimity in different nations will appear not more a recommendation of public worship, than another confirmation of their hypothesis: but to those who hold different sentiments, it should be an argument of no small weight in favour of social prayer, to find it authorized by the laws, and encouraged by the practice, of all the civilized nations of the world.

It will appear too, we trust, upon due consideration, that nations have not in this point acted

acted more uniformly than wisely ; that public prayer is not more recommended by the general example of mankind, than by its own utility.

One of the first advantages of social prayer, as such, is that it animates and improves the piety of the individuals of the assembly. It was the opinion of Pythagoras and Thales, that attendance upon public worship encreased devotion ; and I believe the experience of every good man will confirm the judgment of the philosophers. Our sentiments are always strengthened by the concurring sentiments of others ; and every feeling of the heart is augmented by the corresponding feelings of those about us. The speculatist reposes new confidence in his theory, in proportion as he finds that numbers adopt his conclusions ; and the soldier imbibes from his fellows the contagion of cowardice or courage. Thus will it be in our devotions. Our piety will always grow warmer, when associated with the piety of our fellow-creatures : The natural sympathy of kindred minds will spread through the assembly ; and it is, we trust, acceptable to the Deity, that the subjects of his govern-
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ment should join in supplications for blessings they jointly want; and that all should unite in expressions of gratitude for mercies, which all have enjoyed. In whatever degree then public worship assists our weakness, and improves our piety; in whatever degree it renders our supplications more suited to their own purposes, and more worthy of him, to whom they are addressed; in the same degree will they become more likely to be acceptable and successful. Whatever good effects are supposed to flow from private prayer; those good effects must naturally be increased, in proportion as our devotion is improved.

It will be the more incumbent upon us to attend the public service of the church; because we shall by such attendance, exhibit a good example to others; and contribute to improve their devotion from the same sympathy, by which our own has been improved. In order to render himself in the highest degree useful, and to produce the greatest possible good; it is required of every member of society, not only to discharge faithfully the duties of his station, but to let his conduct and principles appear in their
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proper colours. Above all is this required of him in the offices of religion: not merely because religion is the true basis of happiness, as well as of virtue; but because it is a point in which example has the greatest weight. The votaries of vice and impiety are never so effectually ashamed and checked, as when the majority and the fashion are against them. Many useful and valuable members of the community, who want learning or leisure to examine for themselves the evidence of Christianity, have been led to believe its truth, by their deference for the judgment of the wise and good, who have believed it before them: And in the lower ranks of life we find a still more numerous class of men who have hardly any other means of understanding or practising the duties of religion, than the instruction and example of their superiors; and who, indeed, without such example and instruction, would soon abandon all regard for the exercises of piety and devotion. But this instruction they can seldom hear, this example they can seldom observe, but in their attendance upon the public service of the church. On hardly any other circumstance, so much as on public prayer

prayer and social worship, depend the good effects of Christianity upon the principles, the conduct, and the happiness of the great body of mankind.

It is indeed another powerful recommendation of social worship, that it lays the best foundation for the social virtues. It best teaches humanity and charity. When we assemble for the worship of the great Creator, from whose dignity and perfections we are all at an immeasurable, and almost equal, distance; the circumstances, by which we are distinguished from each other, appear of little importance. Whatever is offensive in the different ranks of society is softened or forgotten. The rich man abates his pride, and the poor man his envy; and each retires from the public assembly with better dispositions than he came. When we reflect that we are all dependent upon the bounty of our maker, and all uniting in the same supplications for his mercy; that we are all equally hastening to the place, where all temporal distinctions shall cease; and where our sentence for happiness or misery will depend, not upon the dignity or meanness of the

station we have filled, but on the manner in which its duties have been performed; we cannot then look upon each other as strangers, rivals, or enemies; but rather as the sons of the same common parent, with the same common interest to pursue; and which will always be most successfully pursued by mutual kindness, support, and assistance. When we pray for each other and for all mankind, it will remind us, not only how diligently we should endeavour to secure for one another the blessings for which we petition; but that we may probably be as much indebted to the prayers of our fellow-creatures, as to their most active support; and that the Almighty may have appointed our happiness to depend upon each other, as much in our devotions, as in the transactions of common life. Considerations, like these, inseparable from social worship, must naturally meliorate the heart: they will produce the disposition that religion requires; and fit us to perform the duties which it has commanded.

It must be yet further observed that as the Almighty is the sole dispenser of blessings to

mankind ; of those which we receive or hope collectively, as members of a community ; no less than of those which we enjoy in our separate capacity, as individuals ; it becomes our duty to offer him correspondent homage for the former, as well as the latter. We are not more bound to prayer or praise in the closet, for private and domestic comforts ; than in the temple, for the general advantages of the society, in which his providence has placed us. The wisdom and equity of general laws ; and the integrity and clemency of princes and magistrates ; the fertility of seasons ; the continuance of peace and tranquillity ; and above all, the purity and preservation of religion ; these, and such as these, constitute public obligations to the Deity, which ought to be publicly acknowledged. It is natural, and it is rational, that, on one hand, national judgments for transgression should be deprecated by national penitence and humiliation ; and that, on the other, national benefits should be solicited or acknowledged in the general and united devotions of the people.

4. These are some of the more obvious

and important advantages of public worship and social prayer. Let us now proceed to consider the use and propriety of prayer in precomposed and prescribed forms; and what will naturally belong to the subject; to examine a few of the objections, on which such forms are sometimes censured and condemned.

In support of precomposed and prescribed forms of prayer may in the first place be urged the striking defects of those which are occasional and unpremeditated. They are generally mean, extravagant, and incoherent; sometimes ludicrous or impious; and almost always unworthy of their place and their object. Their fitness and propriety, indeed, depend wholly upon the judgment, the temper, the learning, and the creed of the minister; and Baxter has observed, that he who holds erroneous opinions, generally puts his errors into his prayers.

Were it possible, however, to render these prayers unexceptionable in their doctrines, their language, and their composition; still there are absurdities inseparable from their
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nature and their use. The unwritten or unpremeditated prayer of the minister is itself a prescribed form to the people; and even the novelty, or the expectation of it, which rouses or gratifies their minds, withdraws them from the proper object of worship. It is not to be supposed, indeed, that the hearer can duly attend to his devotions, while his whole attention is employed to catch the sentiments of the speaker; or that he can rationally or cordially join in petitions, before he clearly understands their propriety or their purpose.

In defence of established forms of prayer must in the next place be urged their own fitness and utility. The sentiments and the language, which we address to our Creator, ought surely to be as correct and respectful, as that which we address to the most exalted of our fellow-creatures: and for the sake of the congregation, they ought to be such as may not offend either the ear or the understanding; as may not provoke disgust, where they ought to excite devotion: and such surely will be best prepared, not by the hasty suggestions of the moment, but by that pre-

vious meditation and study, which the solemnity of the subject so obviously demands.

An established form too teaches the ignorant what to pray for as they ought ; and becomes valuable to them, not only as suitable language for their devotion, but as instruction in its principles. It confines the wild and enthusiastic to such objects as are reasonable in themselves, and adapted to the situation of their hearers ; and it enables all to come prepared to join with sincerity and reverence in the supplications of the congregation.

But the most decisive argument in defence of precomposed and prescribed forms of prayer is the example of those, to whose authority on the subject the greatest deference should be paid. The antient Jews, of whose religion the ritual, as well as the doctrines, was of divine institution, not only employed established forms of devotion ; but there is every reason to believe that in their public worship such only were admitted. The example of our Saviour ought to decide every question

on which it can be produced: and it may be shewn that he regularly attended the synagogues of the Jews; and united with them in all the ceremonies of their religion, which the law required. The apostles, who must be allowed to have best understood the instructions of their master; and the Christians of the first centuries, who must be supposed to have adhered the most strictly to the directions of the apostles; all these, like the Jews before them, not only employed pre-composed and prescribed forms of prayer; but like them too, excluded every other from the regular service of their churches*. Authorities, like these, we admit, cannot be expected to influence the adversaries of Christianity; but they ought to have the utmost weight with all who profess to believe it: and with such only can we be supposed at present to contend. They will at least support our own approbation of our own practice; and confirms us in our attachment to the ceremonies of our national church.

* These several points are amply proved by Lightfoot, Gregory, Bennet, and Hooker.

5. Notwithstanding these obvious and powerful recommendations of established forms of prayer, they are sometimes censured and condemned. Objections are brought against them, which it becomes our duty to refute; not so much, indeed, on account of the native force of the objections themselves; as because every thing rises into importance, by which the interests of religion are in any degree affected.

To these forms, then, it is in the first place objected; that they cannot always be adapted to the circumstances of each of those individuals, of whom the congregation is composed; and consequently that he cannot be expected to join in them with due zeal and fervour, whose immediate and personal interest they are not likely to promote.

To this it may be replied, that when the objection supposes precomposed and prescribed forms not to suit the circumstances of each individual, it supposes what is not frequently the case: and even where the supposition happens to be well founded, the objection

is still rather captious than important ; rather specious than just. Public forms of prayer are certainly general ; because they are intended for the use of numbers, and directed to the general good. Yet will they commonly apply with sufficient accuracy to the situation of every member of the society. One man does not differ very widely from another. Our wants and our weaknesses, our temptations and our transgressions, in the present life are not very dissimilar ; and for the life to come our hopes and prospects are the same, and founded on the same basis. It cannot therefore be difficult to frame addresses to heaven, in which all may join with sincerity and devotion. Where the circumstances of individuals are so peculiar as to require peculiar addresses, these are the proper subjects of private devotion ; suited to the closet more than the temple. Public forms cannot justly be censured for not including, what in its own nature could not be included. And let it not be forgotten, that besides our occasional offices, adapted to all the ordinary contingencies of human life ; whenever extraordinary afflictions, or extraordinary mercies, have been experienced by
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any of her members, our church permits them to make a part of her public service; to be specified amidst her general petitions, or general thanksgivings.

With respect to our own liturgy, indeed, though in it, as in every other human composition, imperfections may certainly be found; yet its general and superior excellence may be very safely maintained. It is so comprehensive in its objects, that little can be added; and so exact, that little need be changed. Its supplications, indeed, are so general and liberal, that almost every man may join in them without scruple; and yet so minute, that hardly a single want of a single individual is overlooked. The variations in the service are judiciously calculated to preserve or to restore attention; but without those capricious and sudden transitions, by which solemnity would be destroyed. The principles it every where inculcates or implies are equally remote from the oppressive terrors of superstition, and the indecent familiarities of enthusiasm. Its devotional language is sufficiently animated to correspond to the warmest piety of the Christian; and yet

yet so rational and sedate, that the most dispassionate philosopher cannot tax it with intemperance: and whatever blessings it solicits, whether public or private, temporal or eternal; it never forgets the deference due to divine wisdom; and begs to have *all our desires and petitions fulfilled only as may be most expedient for us.*

It is again objected to precomposed and prescribed forms of prayer; that theological doctrines are continually declared or implied in them, which are not reconcilable to the private sentiments of individuals; and consequently that such individuals cannot join in the general supplications. They cannot offer addresses to heaven, which violate their own opinions and conviction.

To this objection it is in the first place replied; that established forms of prayer are intended for those only, whose private sentiments they are known or supposed not to offend. Of social worship and prescribed forms it is obviously the basis, the nature, and the design, that they who agree in their religious opinions, should unite in their rites of devotion.

tion. Even those who are loudest in their complaints against the use of such established forms, in one instance, at least, admit the principle, on which they are founded and defended. They allow the use of the prayer dictated by our Redeemer. This prayer too, when examined by the rules of sound criticism and sound sense, appears to be; not a prayer designed to exclude all others; but a model, by which others might be formed. Its purpose expressly was, to correct the vain repetitions of the Heathens and the Jews in their devotions; and to instruct the disciples of Christ to address themselves to the supreme Being with more decency and propriety. And we shall be convinced the composition is worthy of its purpose and its author, if we consider its sentiments and its merits; its comprehension, united with its conciseness; its dignity with its simplicity; its piety towards God, with its benevolence to man*.

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* That the Lord's prayer was intended, not as an exclusive form, but as a model, appears probable on several accounts. 1. From the nature of the case. So concise a composition could hardly be intended to constitute the whole of our devotion; it could hardly apply to all the various

In the next place it must be observed, in answer to the objection, that from no form of prayer to God, can theological doctrines be wholly excluded. To impress the mind

wants and various circumstances of mankind; and it does not include any thanksgiving. 2. When Christ dictated the prayer, he did not use any expressions of exclusion; and the circumstances, under which it was introduced, favour more the notion of its being a model for other addressees to the Deity. 3. The several petitions, of which it consists, were borrowed from the established forms of prayer in use amongst the Jews; and this circumstance appears to imply, not that all such forms should in future be abolished, but that they should be regulated and improved. 4. In other passages of his gospel, our Saviour directs his disciples to ask in his name: but in this prayer his name is not mentioned: nor is there even an allusion to his character or his office, his sufferings or his merits. And they are not alluded to, probably, because they were not at that time rightly understood by his disciples. 5. Our Saviour himself on different occasions employed different forms; and those forms adapted to their respective occasions. Mat. xxvi. 39. and John xvii. 1. 6. St. Paul also employs prayers suited to their respective objects, and directs his converts to do the same. Rom. i. 10. 2 Cor. xii. 8. 1 Tim. ii. 1. 2. Ephes. vi. 19. 7. It does not appear that any of the apostles confined themselves, or directed their converts to be confined, to this form, to the exclusion of all others. 8. If it be proper to employ prayers at all; it must be proper to employ such as are suited to the purposes, for which they are employed.

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with just sentiments of the supreme Being, is one of the great purposes for which divine worship is ordained; and without some conformity of private sentiments no offices of devotion can be performed without absurdity. All who unite in prayer to the Almighty must alike believe his existence and his providence; and when they beg for blessings, must equally admit his power and his will to bestow them. All, indeed, who join in the act of prayer, must be understood to entertain the same hope that God will hear them; and this hope built on the same foundation; on the supposed efficacy of their own supplications, or of the intercession of a mediator. If they solicit pardon for their transgressions, they must agree in opinion respecting not only the possibility that such pardon may be obtained, but the means and conditions, on which it may be expected.

If then theological doctrines cannot be wholly excluded from public forms of devotion; and if some conformity of private sentiments be necessary to social worship; the only question remaining will be, in what degree, and in what detail, it may be proper

to admit the former ; and how far the ground of the latter should be narrowed or extended. And unless the day shall come, when one system of faith shall be universally received, and uniformly understood ; these points will not be easily decided, upon any general principle, or to the general satisfaction. For the sake of peace and tranquillity, however, in the mean time, they must be determined ; either by each society for itself of those who agree to unite in the same ceremonies of worship, or, where there is an established religion, by the supreme authority of the state.*

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* One of the most frequent objections to established forms of prayer is, that they become so well known and familiar, as rather to occasion weariness and languor, than to preserve attention or excite devotion. But the objection is evidently fallacious or inconclusive. It is founded, not upon any inherent defects shewn to be inseparable from established forms of prayer, but upon an abuse, to which such forms are liable : and it is directed, not so much against the mode of addressing our supplications to heaven, as against our weakness or negligence. On the same ground indeed an objection might be urged against every duty, which human beings are required to perform. The objection rests wholly on the supposition that men contract bad habits in the discharge of their religious duties ; and consequently where better habits are contracted, the objection can have

With respect to the more general subject of the present disquisition; to deny the existence of the connection between the act of prayer and its influence with the Almighty, only because we cannot perceive it; or to assert that his attributes render it impossible for him to be affected by our supplications; this seems hardly less unphilosophical, than it is rash and presumptuous. With the nature of the connection between cause and effect we are in all cases but imperfectly acquainted; and we do not comprehend the attributes of the Deity with sufficient clearness, to be able to pronounce with confidence what will be the result of their exercise in the regulation of the moral world. Of the Creator it is the undoubted privilege to govern his own creation. To his omniscience it must be an easy task, to hear the petitions of all his subjects

no foundation. The proper refutation of it, indeed, is not ingenuity of argument, but fervency of devotion. The act of prayer should be considered rather as the effect, than the cause, of piety. It is true that what men do frequently, they are apt to do with negligence. And it is not pretended, that established forms of prayer are liable to no abuse or objection; but that every other mode of devotion is attended with greater inconveniences, and does not possess equal advantages.

here on earth: and to his justice it can be no difficulty, to decide with equity in cases the most complicated and extensive. To his omnipotence it can be no labour, to watch the operations of nature, and to direct every event to the accomplishment of his own purposes; and to his benevolence it will give no pain, to grant to the devout suppliant whatever is fit to be granted; whatever is compatible with his present and future welfare; with his own, and the general good.

If then there be any weight in the arguments that have been adduced; if the considerations, that have been offered, appear reasonable and just; we may still continue to address our petitions to our Creator, without any apprehension that he can want the power or the will to hear us. And in whatever degree our devotion can be improved in propriety or fervour, by our union in public worship, or by previous preparation and study; in the same degree may we be animated with the hope, that our supplications will be acceptable to their object. While we perform the duty of prayer, in obedience to the authority of our scriptures, we may depend upon that efficacy

and success from our petitions, which those scriptures have promised. What we ask in the name of the Son of God, if we ask what we ought, by his intercession, and for his sake, that shall we receive.

SERMON VIII.

THE GOOD EFFECTS OF CHRISTIANITY ON
THE FAITH AND MORALS OF ITS PRO-
FESSORS.

I PET. ii. 12.

Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles; that whereas they speak against you as evil-doers; they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation.

THAT the Christian revelation was intended to rectify the faith, and to improve the morals, of mankind, will not be doubted by any man, who can peruse the volumes, in which its history and its doctrines are recorded. But in what degree it has effected its own purposes has been frequently made the subject of dispute: and the infidel and

the sceptic have founded an objection to its truth or credibility, on its supposed failure in these important points. It has not, they assert, produced even in its followers, that improvement and purity of character and conduct; which its precepts profess to teach, and which its own predictions promised. So far indeed from having accomplished an object so salutary and desirable, they maintain that it has rather been the cause of discord and dissention, of persecution and of war; an instrument of fraud, ambition and tyranny in the hands of priests and princes, and a source of slavery, superstition and depravity in the people. They conclude, therefore, that a religion, which fails so greatly in its own aim and object, cannot reasonably be supposed to have sprung from a divine original, or to enjoy the divine protection; but rather that those who profess, do not themselves sincerely believe it; as their conduct deviates so widely from its laws.

I. Of this objection it will be more than have the refutation to trace its rise and continuance to fallacy and error; to account fairly for its existence, without admitting its truth.

truth. But we can also give the more decisive answer, that it is not supported by facts well authenticated and candidly stated; that Christianity has in no small degree produced the good effects it professes to promote; that it has diminished the crimes, and increased the virtues, of mankind.

1. It may in the first place be observed, that the very principle, on which the objection is founded, is in several respects suspicious and delusive. It is drawn not from any difficulty shewn to be inherent in the religion itself; but from a supposed deficiency in the effects it ought to produce. It does not judge of those effects by the fairest and most natural criterion, the conduct of those who act consistently with the rules which their religion has prescribed; but it rashly condemns Christianity itself; because men are found who violate the laws they profess to obey. It does not call in question the truth of the revelation, by shewing its native incredibility, or the insufficiency of its evidence; but merely insists upon the faults and frailties of its followers. It does not even pretend that these faults and frailties are universal amongst

them; but from the disobedience of a few immediately infers the insincerity of all: and it supposes, what ought never to be supposed, that a man's moral conduct is a decisive test of his religious principles; that he lives as well as he believes. An objection then so fallacious in its foundation, and its nature so inconclusive, ought not surely to have much weight in deciding so important a question, as the truth or falshood of the Christian revelation.

2. One great reason why the lives of Christians do not always correspond to their religion is that freedom of mind and action; without which, responsibility for their conduct could not have been reasonable or just. Christianity is a system, not of compulsion, but persuasion; not of force and necessity, but of liberty and choice. For it is a system, by which moral merit is to be obtained, that happiness may be its reward; or moral guilt incurred, and misery justly become its punishment. The scriptures have prescribed the rules of our duty towards God and towards man: and for our trial and probation, we are to guide and govern the propensities of nature

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ture by the precepts of revelation; or at the hazard of violating the precepts of revelation, to indulge the propensities of nature. Impelled then by passions impatient for indulgence; and surrounded with temptations, by which those passions are continually excited; frequently perplexed between the attractions of inclination, and the dictates of duty; and not seldom deceived by appearances that promise to reconcile them; is it to be wondered that we should sometimes transgress the laws, we confess ourselves bound to obey, and practise what our religion condemns; that we should furnish to those, who wish to find it, a specious pretence for suspecting either the authenticity of what we receive as a divine revelation, or the sincerity of our faith and profession.

3. These defects of conduct, again, appear still more striking, when contrasted with the purity of the rules, by which our actions ought to have been directed; and with the important sanctions, by which those rules are enforced. When the precepts of our duty are considered, as delivered by revelation, the mind spontaneously admits their truth and

excellence. We find a system of conduct prescribed so extensive and perspicuous, that it may direct every man in every situation of life; so adapted to our nature and situation, that the performance seems as easy, as it is just; and so humane and benevolent, that it might be expected to silence for ever the voice of enmity and hostility, and to unite all the sons of men in concord and peace. This system too is enforced by sanctions of such infinite extent and value, as should seem sufficient to decide at once the question between duty and disobedience, and to fix our resolution immoveably on the side of virtue and religion.

But when we again turn our eyes upon the world, we see not only the professors of Christianity separated into different kingdoms, hostile to each other in their sentiments and policy; but each of those kingdoms again divided into various sects and societies, with tenets and interests the most opposite and irreconcilable: we see individuals too the slaves of their passions; envious, ambitious, and selfish; hazarding all the terrors of eternity for petty acquisitions and sensual gratifications;

cations; and the contrast between what men are, and what they ought to be; between what they practise, and what their religion teaches; gives indeed too plausible a ground to assert, that revelation has not produced that improvement in human conduct, which its predictions, as well as its precepts, had taught us to expect.

4. Another specious ground for the same objection is found in the different nature of virtue and vice. Virtue is always modest, silent, and peaceable; vice often forward, loud, and ostentatious. The good man, satisfied with the approbation of his conscience and his God, does not *sound a trumpet before his alms, nor appear unto men to fast*. Nor do acts of virtue naturally possess those striking features and impressive qualities, which forcibly engage the attention, and agitate the passions: and however, therefore, they may be esteemed and loved within the circle of their influence, they do not in general command extensive notice or loud acclamation. But the vices, the riot, and the ambition of the wicked, their crimes, and their consequences, force themselves upon our notice;
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work powerfully on the imagination; and are therefore remembered and recorded. Hence it is that the history of mankind appears at first sight to be little else than the history of their crimes; and a careless and superficial observer might be led to form conclusions from it, very erroneous in themselves, and very injurious to the morality and the nature of the human race. And by a similar delusion many from the transgressions of Christians have been seduced into opinions equally unfounded; equally unfavourable to the truth or the utility of the Christian revelation.

5. The beneficial influence of Christianity is again disputed by means of a comparison between the faults and transgressors of its professors, and the merit and virtues of certain individuals, who doubt or deny its being a divine revelation. Such a comparison, however, is not only invidious and uncandid; as it compares the worst of those who profess our religion, with the best of those who reject it; but is in every other respect fallacious and inconclusive. Wherever Christianity is the established religion of the country,

try, numbers will always profess it from far other motives than conviction of its truth, or principles of piety: merely, for example, because it is the establishment; or because they have been educated in the profession of it; because they look upon some religion as an useful engine of authority over the populace; or because it is a requisite qualification to obtain the honours and emoluments of the state. Almost all, in short, who have no real religion, will profess that which the law requires. And as such men do not apply, or intend to apply it, to the regulation of their morals; it is no wonder their conduct should often violate its principles, and disgrace its character.

On the contrary too individuals may certainly be selected, from those that *make profession of unbelief*, whose lives are decent and regular; who are guilty of no atrocious outrage against the peace of society, or the rules of good morals. For individuals may be found, whose possessions supply them in abundance with all those luxuries, which it is generally the object of crimes to obtain; or whose passions are constitutionally so moderate,

derate, that prudence and policy alone are sufficient to confine them within due bounds; who are well aware, that in point of health or fortune, character or personal safety, they should sacrifice greater advantages, than they could hope to obtain, by more licentious and more criminal indulgence. But surely a few instances, from the influence of causes such as these, or a comparison built upon them; however magnified by artifice, or credited by weakness; can prove nothing against the general tendency, or general utility, of the Christian revelation.

• 6. The same objection is again urged against Christianity by men, who seem to have been led to doubt or deny, its beneficial influence, by having sought it, where it was by no means most likely to be found. We are apt to form our estimate of the morals of an age, of its comparative improvement or degeneracy, from its most conspicuous transactions; from such as engage the pen of the historian, and impress themselves forcibly on the mind; from the debates and resolutions of public assemblies; or the intrigues and contentions of the ambitious and the powerful;

powerful; from the negotiations of embassadors, and the hostilities of rival nations. But it is not here that the good effects of revelation should be sought; it is not here that its efficacy can be fairly tried. Where the strongest temptations continually excite the most impetuous passions of the human mind, the milder voice of religion will seldom be heard; the influence of its morality will be felt the last and the least.

From the tumults and the iniquities of public transactions let the enquirer turn his attention to the middle and inferior ranks of life; to the sentiments and conduct of the obscure inhabitant of the village, of the manufacturer at his anvil, and the husbandman in his fields; and he will there find a considerable proportion of those effects, which the benignant nature of the gospel would teach him to expect. He will there find mutual charity more rationally practised, and more widely diffused; the principles of good morals better understood, and founded on a firmer basis; more effectual controul of appetite; manners more gentle and humane; and greater probity in the ordinary intercourse

course between man and man. He will find minds better prepared for the vicissitudes of life, from a better dependence on the care of providence; greater resignation to the dispensations of the Almighty, from an improved knowledge of his justice and benevolence; and above all, a purer and more rational devotion; with greater hope and consolation under the infirmities of age, and the approach of death. By the superficial observer, indeed, these great and good effects will not be found; by the most attentive and acute their full benefit and value cannot be precisely ascertained; and in the page of the historian they either do not appear at all; or appear only with transient notice and inadequate display. It is not to be wondered, therefore, that their reality has been questioned, or their extent and importance denied.

It is true, however, that the moral effects of Christianity cannot be considered as complete, till it has influenced public, as well as private, transactions; the conduct of nations, as well as of individuals. But this will be, though its greatest, probably its
latest

latest triumph; for this can be brought about only through the medium of private character: and will therefore be a change not rapid in its progress, and visible at every step; but gradual in its advances, and perceptible only when considerable effects have been produced. Usages and institutions highly repugnant to the spirit of Christianity may long remain; if either the general habits of a nation, or the interest of powerful individuals continue to support them. The hand of industry may change the face of a country in a few years; but to change the sentiments and manners of a people often requires as many generations. The political conduct of men must at last, however, take its colour from their morals. Whenever the virtues of the individual in private life are fixed and confirmed on the principles of true religion, he will carry them along with him into power and authority. Whenever the people in general are upright and religious; the government cannot long be iniquitous in its constitution, or corrupt in its administration. And whenever independent nations shall be equally influenced by Christianity, unjustifiable plans of policy will not be mutually practised, and mutually

provoked. That such is the natural tendency of our religion will not be questioned; and how far these principles have already produced their effects, or are likely to produce them, shall hereafter be enquired*.

7. It

* It would be an enquiry by no means without curiosity or importance, to examine in what degree the good effects of the Christian revelation have been counteracted and retarded; not merely by the errors and vices of private individuals; but by conspicuous and extraordinary instances of human folly or depravity; by the intrigues of statesmen, and the regulations of policy. For the three first centuries Christianity obtained no civil establishment: it was frequently persecuted, and at best but tolerated; and could hardly therefore have any great and visible effect on national morality or national character. For the four following centuries the barbarians of the north overwhelmed almost all the civilized world; and in the general wreck of science Christianity was obscured, and almost forgotten. During this interval too the successful ambition of Mahomet over-ran the Eastern part of Christendom, and corrupted the religion of the gospel; and it is still held in bondage to the successors of his imposture and authority. How far the progress of Christianity in Europe was during the same period retarded by the papal usurpations, it may be difficult to determine. But it is obvious that an essential injury, for a time at least, must be done to the cause by the revolution in France. For what wise purposes, and to what extent, providence may permit

7. It is again maintained that Christianity, far from having produced the purity and peace it seems to promise, has been the perpetual source of discord and dissention; that it has been the cause of persecution and of war; and eventually of almost every crime and cruelty, which disturbs society, or disgraces human nature.

That variety of opinions, and consequently discord and dissention, might reasonably be expected respecting religion and its doctrines, has been already shewn. But it was shewn at the same time, that such variety was no fair ground of objection to the evidence or the utility of Christianity; nor any imputation to the wisdom or benevolence of its author; that it was a probable and almost inevitable consequence of the nature of revelation and the nature of man*.

That Christianity has been the cause of persecution and of war, with their respective consequences, is a fact which cannot be denied. But to permit such events, it is not for human wisdom to decide. But we hope and believe that over such opposition and such crimes truth and religion will finally triumph.

* In Sermon I.

tive trains of crimes and cruelties, if true at all, is true only under very great limitations. The professors of Christianity were not the original authors of religious persecution: for Pagans persecuted Pagans long before the Redeemer appeared in the world. Amongst the Persians all who did not profess the doctrines of Zoroaster were persecuted almost to extermination; and in Egypt, the worship of different deities produced severe and sanguinary contests between their respective votaries. The Roman emperors, with their council of philosophers, persecuted the Christians, long before the Christians betrayed any disposition to persecute each other.

The only persecution, for which Christianity can be responsible, if it be responsible for any, must be where men have persecuted with sincerity, for religion and for conscience sake. Of such persecutors, however, the number has probably either never been great; or it has been formed of such as were not the primary authors and advisers of such a mode of conversion or of punishment; but of such as were the followers and the dupes of
leaders,

leaders, whose real views and motives were of a very different nature; but who found it convenient to pretend a zeal for the interests of Christianity. But whatever have been the motives, the zeal, or the errors of its professors, the gospel itself contains no injunction for its own propagation by force and compulsion; and ought not therefore to be censured for what it has no where commanded.

With respect to the laws, which, in so many countries and on so many occasions, have been enacted, to support the establishments of Christianity; and against which the charge of intolerance and persecution has been so vehemently urged; it cannot be shewn that Christianity itself is accountable either for their principle or their effects. They appear to have proceeded, from the general wish of all who have obtained power to keep possession of it; from their desire to preserve the peace and tranquillity of the country, in which they hold the pre-eminence; or from a supposition of its being their duty to guard or to propagate by their authority, that doctrine and worship, which they deemed essential to

the virtue and happiness of the people. But whatever difference of opinion may be entertained respecting the equity, the wisdom, or the piety of those laws, or the principles from which they have proceeded; no censure ought to fall on the religion itself; for though it may have been the occasion of them, it has not been the only or the principal motive; it has been the subject, not the cause.

Of the wars which have been called religious, and of which our religion has been supposed to be the sole author and origin, the real motives have generally been personal or political; and the gospel only the pretext to disguise the views of interest or ambition, or to gain proselytes to their cause. The war of the League, which desolated France for near half a century, was begun and continued, if we are to believe the historian* who was best able to determine the point, not from the enmity of discordant doctrines in religion; not from zeal for the purity of the Christian faith; but from the ambition, the intrigues, and animosities of contending factions. And

* Davila.

even the Crusades themselves had their origin less in concern for the honour of Christianity, than in the avarice and ambition of the Roman pontiffs.

These considerations are by no means intended to justify persecution among Christians; but to shew that it has arisen, not from any defect in revelation, but from the weakness or wickedness of mankind; not from the genuine influence of the religion, but from its abuse and perversion; not from true piety and *zeal according to knowledge*; but from ignorance, bigotry, and superstition.

Many other observations will readily occur, which equally tend to exculpate Christianity from the guilt of persecution; and to fix the blame upon the errors and passions of its professors.

On whatever the human mind dwells long and attentively, the passions are apt to grow warm, interested and enthusiastic; and not seldom force into their service the understanding, which they ought to obey. In ordinary affairs the effect is the fancied impor-

tance of a frivolous pursuit, or zeal for a favourite hypothesis: but in religion it has too often been superstition, bigotry and persecution.

Christians, like other men, when in possession of civil authority, have sometimes misapplied it; and endeavoured to obtain by fear or force that submission in opinion, which should be sought only by conciliation and conviction. They have too often carried to excess their zeal in a good cause; in a cause which has so much influence on human happiness, that the value of the end in view was thought to justify whatever means seemed likely to promote it.

If again the corruption of religion, and the abuse of its name and authority, have really occasioned in society all the mischiefs which its adversaries have supposed; the most natural conclusion is, that where it is rightly understood and duly obeyed, its use and advantages will be at least of equal extent and magnitude. The evils of misapplication can be only in proportion to its utility when more wisely directed,

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That the Christian religion has been the pretext to conceal or to promote criminal and even impious purposes, cannot be an argument against its truth or its value; unless it can destroy the reality or the advantages of integrity, friendship, or humanity, that they have been assumed as a disguise by those, who intended most grossly to violate the virtues, which it suited their purpose to counterfeit.

These errors, excesses, and abuses Christianity itself is calculated to correct: not indeed miraculously and at once; but by gradually illuminating the minds of men, and rectifying their conduct; not by force and compulsion; but by the introduction of purer principles of action, and stronger motives to their duty. It is observable accordingly, that as the doctrines of Christianity have been more diligently studied and better understood, persecution has proportionably declined. The religion itself best teaches the toleration it requires. We now hear nothing of the flames and the stake in our own country; and not much of the inquisition in any other: and it is hardly more desirable, than it is probable, that they will never be revived.

8. There is yet another shape, in which the same objection may be considered as again brought forward; in that peevish complaint, which we hear almost every day, against the degeneracy of the age; against the encreasing follies and vices of the present race of men, compared and contrasted with the wisdom and the virtues of those who have gone before us. This seems indeed to be insisted on by the weak, the melancholy, or the malevolent, merely as the subject of lamentation and censure; rather than as any direct attack upon the truth or the effects of a divine revelation. Yet still such is its obvious tendency; and such must be the inference from it. If mankind be in a state of progressive corruption; it is clear they cannot have been improved by the influence of Christianity. It seems therefore necessary, and it does not seem difficult, to shew that this opinion and complaint have their origin in fallacy and error; in mistaken premises, or mistaken conclusions.

From the same authority, by which we have learned how human nature was first brought into existence, we have learned also, that it is now less pure and perfect than it came

came from the hands of the Creator; that by the transgression of the divine command sin and misery first entered the world. That some imperfect account of the fall of man had found its way to the heathen world, is evident both from the fables of their poets and the disquisitions of their philosophers. And when they had been once informed that some degeneracy had taken place in human nature, the most natural and obvious conclusion was, that such degeneracy must have been gradual and progressive. This gradual depravation of our nature they have represented as so many successive ages; each under the emblem of a metal less pure and precious than that which went immediately before it. Instead of the state of innocence, we find them describing an age of gold; and crowding it with all the virtues, which philosophy could teach, and all the enjoyments, which appetite could desire. We are then presented with ages of silver and of brass; and a proportionate decay in the merits and the happiness of mankind: till each plaintive author finds his own times the iron age, overwhelmed in ignorance, misery, and corruption. Thus a complaint begun, almost with the beginning of the world,

world, from an imperfect knowledge of the truth, may have been continued down to the present day from custom and imitation.

Custom and imitation, however, have been by no means the only causes, from which the complaint has been continued. All who from vanity have thought their merits injuriously neglected; and all who from envy have repined at the prosperity of others; all who from their own malignity have ceased to love their fellow-creatures; all who have felt themselves unhappy, and supposed their own condition the general condition of life; and all whose gloomy dispositions have made them view the objects around them on the less favourable side; all these have been led to seek sullen gratification in railing at the ignorance and corruption of their cotemporaries; and in wishing their lives could have been passed among wiser nations, and in happier times,

There is another reason for this complaint still more extensive in its influence, but in its nature equally inconclusive. We have our knowledge of the vices of former times only from history; but we see and feel the vices

vices of our own; and hence arise several fallacies, which lead men to believe the latter the more numerous and malignant. By the faults and follies of our cotemporaries our own interest is immediately affected, and all our passions agitated and alarmed. But in the crimes of former ages we have only a remote and feeble concern; and they operate less powerfully on the mind. To compare them therefore is, with common minds, to compare a crime portrayed upon canvas, with a crime committed in our sight; it is to compare the flame that glimmers in the atmosphere at a distance, with the flame which threatens our own habitation.

To this must be added, that different vices have prevailed at different periods and in different nations of the world; and men have from this circumstance been led into an unfair estimate of the merits of their own times. Changes, revolutions, and fashions take their turn even in depravity; as well as in the more amiable parts of human conduct. Though our ancestors, therefore, were as corrupt as ourselves: yet they probably differed from us in the kind and manner of their leading vices; and

and the wickedness of which we feel the bad effects, appears to us of all other the most mischievous and intolerable. From the pain we now feel, and from the iniquity which immediately offends us, we are apt to imagine relief would be found by a change for pain in any other situation; for iniquity of any other kind.

Nor must it be forgotten that history attends only to important events, and splendid vices or virtues; to the counsels of senates, and the conduct of commanders; to the ravages of war, and the miseries of a deluge or famine. But by these the happiness of private life is seldom very greatly or permanently affected. That depends chiefly upon incidents and objects, which would be of little consequence, but for their frequency; and of which though each separately produces but a small effect, yet in the aggregate they constitute the misery or the felicity of life. Let any man reflect how much of his pleasure or vexation arises from the good or ill behaviour of a favourite child; from the attention or coldness of a private friend; or from the manner in which the daily wants of his life are supplied;

supplied; and he will soon be convinced that he must rest his chance for happiness in the world on far other causes, than the vices or virtues of statesmen, and the revolutions of empires. But transactions so obscure and so minute the historian generally thinks it beneath his dignity to discuss or to record; and while the mind is employed upon public transactions and important events, the reader scarcely turns his attention to the ordinary occurrences of domestic life; where pleasures and sufferings arise in the common methods from common things. While we find not in the page of history any of those petty vexations, by which we feel our own peace destroyed, we are apt to forget that they existed; and to imagine that we are harrassed by depravity, from which former ages were happily exempted.

There is yet another fallacious ground for the complaint against the degeneracy of the present times. The observation is not more common than it is just, that of old men it is the peculiar propensity and the constant practice to extol the times of their youth, at the expence of those when they are more advanced in age. And for this propensity and prac-

tice a variety of causes may be assigned. When a man's passions are weakened and his sensations blunted by the hand of time, he receives all the blessings of life with less alacrity and less relish; and when we are become less capable of enjoyment, it is but too common to conclude, that objects are less worth enjoying; that the decay is in nature, and not in ourselves. While the young and the gay are pursuing their own business or their own amusements, the aged see themselves in some degree neglected; and the common self-partiality leads them to imagine that when they were to pay respect to age, instead of receiving it, much more was paid. It is one of the most frequent errors of our imagination to suppose, that we were happier in any past situation, than in the present; and it is peculiarly the misfortune of age to recollect the participation of pleasures, and to feel only weakness and infirmities; and while they are less pleased with life, by an easy mistake they conclude that life itself is less pleasing. Men advanced in age have at length been fully convinced that there is much selfishness and meanness in mankind; which while warm in the pursuits of youth,
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and gay in the hopes of happiness, they either did not perceive, or were not at leisure to attend to. But painful experience of sufferings has now sharpened their sagacity; what they have recently discovered, appears to have recently arisen; and the supposed encrease of depravity naturally produces or augments their propensity to censure and complain.

It is true that these errors and complaints of age do not arise immediately from any doubt of the beneficial influence of Christianity; nor have they perhaps ever been directly adduced as an argument against it. But such is their natural tendency; and must be in some degree their ultimate effect. For as they countenance and encourage the notion of the deterioration of present objects and present times; they necessarily deny the improvement of men and morals from the influence of any cause; and therefore from the doctrines and precepts of revelation.

II. If then the causes that have been stated will account sufficiently for the rise and continuance, both of the opinion that the influence of Christianity has not been beneficial,

and of the consequent objection to its efficacy and success in its own purposes; it should seem not unfair to conclude at once, that the true causes have been assigned; that the opinion is an error, founded upon suppositions, which are themselves erroneous; that the objection must fall with the fallacies by which it is supported. But a still more decisive answer can be given from the evidence of authentic facts. It may be shewn that revelation has in a considerable degree produced those beneficial effects, which its own records, as well as its advocates, have taught us to expect. And that we may arrive the more speedily at our conclusion; that we may not perplex historical documents by any abstract and circuitous reasoning; let it suffice briefly to specify a few of the more obvious instances, in which Christianity has accomplished its own purposes; in which it has diminished the crimes, or increased the virtues of mankind.

1. The first and most obvious instance, in which Christianity has produced improvement, is in our conceptions of the nature of the Deity, and our sentiments of religion in general;

general; by the exchange of polytheism for the belief in the unity of the Godhead; by the abolition of idolatry, with all its absurdities and impieties; and the introduction of a rational worship of the great Creator; and above all, by manifesting and illustrating the benevolence of the Deity, in the inestimable offer of redemption, of the pardon of sin by a Saviour, and of the resurrection to life and immortality. But as the advantages which religion has derived from revelation have been already insisted on*, they need not be again discussed; and as the improvement of morality is more immediately the point in question, to that our detail shall be confined.

2. One of the very valuable improvements, which revelation has introduced into morality is, the placing it upon a basis of universality and perfection. Men have always been inclined to suppose, that different virtues are of different value; that we are bound to the performance of different duties by obligations of different force; and that the performance accordingly constitutes a higher or lower de-

* In Sermon II.

gree of merit. The supposition too has probably been encouraged by human laws; which have their distinctions between perfect and imperfect rights; between duties of perfect and imperfect obligation: and it is obvious indeed that the perpetration of different crimes; that the due discharge or the omission of different duties; must produce very different degrees of good or evil to individuals and to society. Into the reality or the utility of these distinctions it is not the present intention to enquire. In one instance at least, they seem to have been prejudicial to sound morality. They have contributed to create or to confirm the notion, that as some duties may be neglected with less guilt and danger than others; so the fulfilling superior obligations may compensate for the neglect of inferior; and a compromise be made between our duty and our passions, between virtue and vice, between God and Mammon.

In the morality of revelation no such distinction can be traced. The scriptures do not divide our conduct into virtues of higher and lower estimation; into duties that must
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be performed, and that may be omitted. They teach, not the detail of practice, but the general principle; *to keep a conscience void of offence*; and to shew it by an equal obedience *to every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God*. Their language is, *thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself*; and that *whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, is guilty of all*. The scriptures then do not make the guilt of a transgression to consist so much in the transgression itself, as in the violation of a principle. They do not estimate a crime by its incidental consequences; which the criminal himself does not always intend, and can seldom calculate; but by the impiety and disobedience, which it implies. They weigh an offence against God, not so much by the importance of the duty violated, as by the contempt of his authority; by that corruption of heart, which with appropriate temptation, would violate every other *commandment of the law*. They do not, on the other hand, calculate merely the good that is effected by obedience; but the piety also, from which it proceeds. They consider every

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duty

duty as of equal obligation in its own time and place; and every man as equally bound according to his opportunities and his talents; the widow to contribute her mite, and the rich man his abundance; and in proportion, not so much to their success and its effects, as to their principles and their exertions, will be their merit and their reward.

3. It must be considered as another good effect of Christianity, that in every country where it has prevailed, it has materially influenced and rectified the public judgment in morals. It has given a fixed and permanent standard of duty; of which all sects and parties have admitted the excellence and utility; to which a tacit appeal at least is continually made; and which at length in a great degree corrects and regulates the opinion of the public. Too many instances indeed of immoral and irreligious conduct may still be found: but they have not the encouragement of general approbation; they are rarely tolerated as innocent; and still more rarely applauded as virtuous. Daily intercourse and conversation are less licentious; criminal excess is not an ordinary subject of ostentation and

and vain-glory; and immorality less frequently and less grossly contaminates the national amusements. By this means an essential service is done to society. In the most improved ages of Greece and Rome vices were practised openly and without a blush; which in Christian countries are not mentioned but in terms of detestation. In the latter it is obvious indeed that many, who would disregard religion, are kept within the bounds of duty, or of decency, by a sense of shame; and habit may in time ripen into principle. Others again, who cannot be stimulated to virtue, are driven to silence and secrecy in their vices; and diffuse less widely the contagion of their sentiments and their example. And perhaps a still greater number act uprightly from principles, which they suppose to be derived from the light and instincts of nature, from the deductions of their own reason, or the dictates of their own conscience; but which in reality have been imbibed from the public opinion; and from that truth and rectitude, which Christianity has given it. This is indeed one of the good effects of the gospel, of which the extent and value cannot be precisely ascertained; but

which, till the fact can be disputed, none will deny to be important, who are sensible of what importance it is, to have public opinion on the side of religion and virtue.

4. One of the most extensive benefits of Christianity to human conduct is felt in the improvement of our systems of national policy; in an amendment of the principles of government and legislation. The political establishments of the heathens were but ill adapted to the great purposes, to which all government should be directed, the advancement of the virtue and happiness of mankind. They were in general nothing more than the concise system of despotism in the prince and slavery in the people; and therefore of continual anxiety, suspicion, and cruelty in the sovereign; and poverty fear and misery in the subject. Thus wretched were their monarchies: and the happiness of the people was no way more effectually secured in their boasted republics. In these by far the greater part of every community were in name and in reality slaves: and if we enquire into the treatment of these unfortunate men, we shall find they were subjected to the severest and
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most unjustifiable tyranny, that man ever exercised upon man. The citizens themselves were indeed flattered with the notion and the name of liberty; but with an exception only of those seasons of tumult and anarchy, to which the nature of their government was peculiarly exposed, they were continually enslaved to such ambitious demagogues, as had inclination and abilities to obtain popularity and power. And hence the history of an antient commonwealth, as has been justly observed, is little else than the history of a few illustrious individuals, who were successively its masters. Nor were these illustrious individuals themselves in a situation much to be envied. Even in Athens itself, the proudest seat of antient science, and the proudest boast of the modern philosopher, superior talents, virtue, and patriotism could seldom secure to their possessors permanent esteem and honour; and not always personal safety. By their tribunals of justice Miltiades was sentenced to a prison, Aristides to exile, and Socrates to death.

That these evils have been softened and diminished by the benign influence of Christianity,

tianity, it will require no great sagacity to discover; no tedious disquisition to demonstrate. In political establishments our Saviour never directly interfered; intending, no doubt, that the external regulations, the rites and ceremonies, of a religion designed for universality, should be adapted to the circumstances and the civil government of each respective country; and well knowing that the religion itself would teach us equity and moderation on the best of all principles; the natural equality of men in the sight of God: not indeed the visionary and ruinous equality of the republican and the leveller; but an equality at once real, rational, and beneficial. Christianity instructs us to look upon all mankind as our brethren; as the offspring of the same common parent: not as entitled to any equality of possessions or endowments; but as heirs of the same nature, and the same frailties; as created for society, and subordination to each other; but as subjects of the same almighty governor; trusting for pardon of our offences to the same redeemer and judge; and enjoined to practise the same duties, under the hope and promise of the same rewards. Thus the foundation of civil
policy

policy is laid in general humanity; and our duty to man built upon the immoveable basis of our duty to God.

The effects of these doctrines upon political government may at first sight appear but remote, indirect, and incidental; yet are they natural and certain; and wherever the Christian religion in any great degree prevails are felt and confessed. It was the first Christian emperor that united humanity with his policy. Constantine first softened the severity of legal penalties; alleviated the hardships, to which slaves were condemned; and above all, gave supreme authority to the laws; and fixed them as a rule of conduct obligatory alike upon the sovereign and the subject. It was from the benign influence of the Christian revelation that the codes of Theodosius and Justinian excelled all the systems which had gone before them; and gave a principle and a basis to all succeeding institutions. The gospel has not, it is needless to observe, either eradicated the inordinate love of power from the minds of its professors; or universally prevented its abuse. It has not perfected human policy; because it has not yet perfected human

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morals.

morals. But it has been the principal cause, why the asperities of different ranks of men are softened towards each other; why magistrates are moderate in the exercise of authority, and the people conscientious in their subjection to the laws; why *the rich and the poor meet peaceably together, knowing that the Lord is the maker of them all.*

5. The most dreadful and destructive of all human transactions is national war: and this too has felt the benign influence of our religion. Amongst the nations of antiquity the arts of peace were held but in a secondary estimation. Personal strength and agility, skill and bravery in combat, were the qualities most highly valued: and the study, the employment, and the ambition of almost every people was war, victory, and conquest. These wars too were commenced upon such motives, and conducted upon such principles, as were no less inconsistent with sound policy, than with justice and humanity. The conqueror, from the desire of revenge, the love of plunder, or the wantonness of cruelty, frequently ravaged in such a manner the countries he had conquered, as to seize or destroy all the necessaries

faries of life; and sometimes to extirpate the people. The unfortunate captives too were generally either put to the sword in cold blood; offered in superstitious sacrifice to *them that are no Gods*; or reserved for a fate still more wretched, and sold into slavery for the rest of life.

Between Christian nations these aggravations of the natural horrors of war are softened or excluded. Hostility ceases with resistance: unnecessary violence is systematically avoided; and the persons and properties of individuals, as far as possible, protected. The wounded are treated even by their enemies with tenderness; and the prisoners with generosity. Conquered provinces are governed with equity; and the immediate ministers in this unnatural trade are usually considered as the models of delicacy of sentiment and elegance of manners. This mercy and moderation, however, can be traced no higher than to the establishment and influence of the principles of the gospel. When Rome was stormed and plundered by the Goths, Alaric and his army gave an example of humanity to their vanquished enemies,

mies, not less to be admired for its novelty, than applauded for its merit*. Since that era wars and their cruelties, amongst the professors of Christianity at least, have gradually declined: and it is almost as reasonable, as it is pleasing, to hope, that the time will come, when both shall cease; when the prediction of the prophet shall be literally fulfilled; and men *shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; when nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more*: when indeed nation shall visit nation, bringing with them, not the instruments of war and the engines of destruction, but the arts of peace, and the comforts of life: when fleets shall traverse the ocean, not to transport the soldier and the plunderer, but the teachers of wisdom, and the ministers of the gospel: when the unlettered Indian shall change his apprehensions of a robber in every European, for the expectation of a benefactor; and his fears of death or slavery, for the prospects of revelation, and the hope of everlasting life.

* Aug. De Civit. Dei, lib. 1.

6. Never perhaps did any thing under the name and character of a public amusement, so flagrantly violate both good morals and humanity, as the combats of the gladiators on the amphitheatre at Rome. Yet did these combats subsist for centuries in the most enlightened nation of the world, sanctioned by the taste of the people, and protected by the laws. The first edicts which condemned them were published by the Christian emperors; and these edicts owed their efficacy and success to the zeal and spirit of a Christian priest. That his life fell a sacrifice to the resentment of the populace is indeed to be lamented; but cannot deprive his memory and his principles of the honour of a successful opposition to so sanguinary a practice: for the combats of the gladiators have never since polluted a public theatre, or disgraced the Christian name*.

7. Many other instances, in which Christianity has contributed to the improvement of morality, may easily be produced; and a few shall be concisely stated.

* Gibb. Rom. Emp. chap. 30.

In the article of highest importance to domestic happiness, the conjugal union, Christianity and its teachers have introduced the most rational regulations, not only for its formation, but for its dissolution. They have, on one hand, banished polygamy; and on the other, restrained the right of divorce to its proper cause; the violation, by one of the parties, of the fundamental principle of their contract and their vows.

In a point immediately connected with the former, and of no less importance, we are again greatly indebted to Christianity. An unnatural parent is no longer permitted to immolate his child in superstitious sacrifice; or, what was a practice still more general amongst the heathens, to expose the infant, which he does not wish to rear; to reduce by the most unfeeling calculation the number of his children to his circumstances; and to educate such only as he judges likely to bring honour or advantage to his family or himself. The parent, who should now attempt this in a Christian country, would be stigmatised by public opinion as a monster, and punished as a criminal by the laws.

In Roman morality, even in its brightest era, suicide was not considered as a crime. It was indeed rather thought to confer new dignity on the character of the perpetrator. It was encouraged by the example of the hero; and vindicated in the disquisition of the philosopher. Under the gospel it is more justly considered as murder with its worst aggravations; as an offence against nature, as well as against duty; as a detestable complication of cowardice with guilt.

To the influence of Christianity we owe almost exclusively one of the best exertions of philanthropy, eleemosynary establishments: not only the legal and regular provision for the poor; but the voluntary contributions of the liberal and wealthy in a thousand ways; our collections at religious festivals, and in seasons of scarcity; our schools of charity, for the education of the children of the unfortunate and necessitous; our hospitals, for the retreat of age, misfortune, or disease.

These, and such as these, are the improvements which we ascribe with gratitude to the Christian revelation. That most of
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them are justly ascribed to it, can be shewn from unquestioned records of history: and it is surely fair to attribute the rest to the same cause; as they cannot with fairness be imputed to any other. In the times antecedent to our Saviour's appearance in the world no such improvements can be traced. But as soon as his religion obtained influence and establishment, they began to be seen and felt; and by a gradual, though not regular progress, have attained to their present state. It is not, however, with a view to flatter the present state of morals, that these improvements have been specified. For it is not to be dissimulated, that we are yet at a melancholy distance from that purity and perfection, which revelation has prescribed. Our superiority over our heathen ancestors has been insisted on, not to exalt ourselves, but the religion we profess; not to extol the ways of men, but to justify the ways of God. It is to repel the objection brought against Christianity from its supposed inefficacy; to shew that it has long since begun to produce the reformation it promised; that this reformation is still in progress; and that in all probability every pretext for the objection

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jection will at last be removed. The time, we trust, will come when Christianity shall be so fully and universally obeyed, that the most magnificent predictions of its prophets shall be accomplished; when *they shall not hurt nor destroy in all the holy mountain**; and *the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord†*.

8. I have now considered as many of the difficulties respecting the truth and credibility of divine revelation, as the limits of the present lecture will admit; and in considering them the aim and object have been to shew, not that the difficulties do not exist; but that they are not insuperable; not that the objections are wholly groundless; but that they are not conclusive against the divine origin of Christianity. In each of the points that have been examined; in the variety of religions in the world, or in the variety of opinions upon them; in the real weakness and boasted strength of human reason; or in the nature and necessity of a divine reve-

* Isai. xi. 9.

† Hab. ii. 14.

lation; in the precepts of the gospel, as they affect the enjoyments of the present life; in the mysterious doctrines, which it contains; or in the duties of worship, which it prescribes; in the want of universality in its publication and reception; or in its want of due influence on the lives of its professors; in each of these the attempt has been to prove, that there is nothing inconsistent with itself, or with the attributes of the Deity; nothing unsuitable to the nature of a divine revelation, or to the beneficial purposes, which it professes to promote; nothing irreconcilable to the truth of prophecy; or inadmissible as articles of faith by the human mind. If this can be effected, the positive evidence will then operate in its full force; and by that, and that only, must the divine origin of the gospel finally stand or fall. But in proportion as objection is invalidated, the grounds of faith are strengthened; as perplexity and delusion are dissipated, the mind is open to truth and conviction. Whatever is not physically impossible, is credible when competent witnesses are produced; and the Christian revelation

is to be believed, not because every difficulty can be clearly solved, or every article demonstrated; but because there is adequate evidence; evidence as strong as the facts are extraordinary; to us at present, indeed, the usual evidence of history; though from peculiar circumstances entitled to more than usual credit; but in its origin, and its first teachers, preternatural testimony to preternatural truth.

The Christian Revelation, however, is to be recommended, not merely because it has the advantage in point of argument; the preponderance of probability, and *a cloud of witnesses* in its favour; but because it offers blessings, with which no other objects of human pursuit can come in competition; because it is every way superior to every other system of faith and hope. To our duty it inseparably connects our interest; and unites the best affections of the heart with the best conclusions of the understanding.

Were the arguments for and against a future state equal; were the difficulties a balance to the evidence; still it would be wis-

dom to secure the better side of so important an alternative, by a faithful discharge of the duties of our station. In the present life it is always thought prudent and creditable, to take the chances in our favour; to incline to the side of safety. Should we not take some care to provide for the inestimable chances of eternity! In this life too, where the point is doubtful, we may often suspend our judgment without mischief or danger; where we know not how to act right, we may refuse to act at all. But on the question of revelation a decision must be made. We are not permitted to take a middle course between faith and infidelity, between duty and disobedience. The Creator will not share his honour with his creatures: we cannot divide our services between God and Mammon.

If again we reject the Christian revelation, we are launched into an ocean of uncertainty both in principle and practice; with no compass to direct, no friendly star to guide us to the haven of satisfaction or safety. Philosophy cannot inform us whence we came; or whither we are appointed to go. It leaves us to comfort or torment each other for a season,

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son, to enjoy or suffer, as it may happen; and ere long to bow beneath the stroke of death; of which it can tell us neither the cause, the manner, nor the end. But revelation offers a solution of all these difficulties; a light to guide our steps through this labyrinth of darkness. It points out both the course we ought to pursue, and abundant motives to pursue it. Of our duty it has proclaimed the nature and the end, the performance and the recompence. Revelation has furnished the proper object of faith, and confidence to hope: it has supplied alleviation to misfortune, and consolation even in death; for it has promised to virtue support and reward. Had Cicero been acquainted with the doctrines of Christianity, he would not have maintained, that he was the only wise man, who had extinguished his passions: and had Brutus known them, he would not have pronounced virtue to be only a shadow.

What is the chief good of man, was a question which the philosophers of antiquity incessantly discussed, but were never able to determine. In the indulgence of their senses they found not gratification adequate to their

capacities: and the exercise of virtue was exposed to difficulties and vexations, of which they could not perceive the cause or the advantage. Whether they chose a public or a private station; an active or a contemplative life; they were still disappointed of the happiness, for which they believed man to be formed, and which they felt that he desired. Where it was to be found, or why it was withheld, they were equally unable to discover. By revelation the question is decided, and the perplexity removed. The practice of virtue is the task appointed for us; its difficulties are our probation; and its reward our greatest good. To promote the happiness of others in order to secure our own, is at once the essence of our duty and the end. This is at present an object of desire adequate to our capacities, and will hereafter be an adequate gratification.

But when philosophy teaches infidelity, it shrinks still further from a comparison with the Christian revelation. Christianity every way exalts human nature; while by infidelity it is every way degraded and debased. Infidelity lets loose the worst passions of the heart;

all that corrupt the individual, and disturb the peace of society. But Christianity points our affections to their proper objects, and confines them within such bounds, as would at once secure the interests of those about us, and the tranquillity of our minds. Infidelity would sink us nearly to a level with *the beasts that perish*; and Christianity exalts us to the society of angels of light. Infidelity limits our enjoyments and our prospects to a few years of precarious life on earth, and its still more precarious pleasures; while Christianity teaches us to aspire to glory and immortality in heaven. Infidelity leaves us the sons of sinful men; and Christianity makes us by adoption the sons of God.

It is another important recommendation of the gospel, that it has placed our duty upon an explicit and intelligible basis; the will and word of God. In the precepts of Christianity this principle is every where implied or expressed; either directly assigned, or recognised as already known. We need not therefore now engage in any intricate disquisitions on the laws of nature and right reason; on the love of virtue for its own sake; or a conduct

duct agreeable to the fitness of things. We need not perplex ourselves with deep and unavailing researches into the foundation of the rule of right; the standard of truth; or the origin of obligation. God himself has condescended to be our instructor. His commands are the rule of right; his authority is obligation; and the sanction our own good. Obedience is virtue, and disobedience sin. The former ensures his approbation, and our own happiness; and the latter incurs his displeasure, and our punishment.

Of the Deity too revelation, and revelation only, has vindicated the nature and perfections. It has not only asserted the existence of his moral attributes; but shewn their consistency with the visible system of the world, and the present circumstances of mankind. Of these infidelity could give no satisfactory account. It ascribed them to a fortuitous concurrence of atoms; to a blind and capricious chance; or to a fixed and resistless fate; to principles it could not explain; to names that had no meaning. Revelation has shewn that the end of our creation was our own happiness; and has assigned the causes, why this
happiness

happiness is not immediately and universally obtained. It has explained how disobedience to the laws of God is consistent with his providence and justice; how the existence of physical evil may be reconciled to his goodness; our imperfections to his wisdom; and our sufferings to his mercy. It has taught us resignation to the divine will on rational and intelligible principles; and reconciled cheerfulness in obedience with the seeming severity of our task. It is thus that the gospel has made the present condition of man and the visible system of creation bear testimony to its own truth and authenticity. It has established itself upon a basis, which true philosophy could not have discovered; and against which, we are assured, false philosophy shall not prevail.

If, however, doubts are still entertained, and objections continue to be urged; each should be considered as an additional incitement to our zeal and diligence in the cause. The ignorance and vices of one part of mankind give exercise and value to the wisdom and virtues of the rest. And while providence permits the influence of the gospel to be only

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partial and imperfect, he seems to intend it as an opportunity for us to perform the most important duties; to enhance our own merit. If Christianity is not yet universally known, or not duly obeyed; it is incumbent upon us to endeavour to propagate its doctrines by our instruction, and to give effect to its precepts by our example. One of the noblest instances of virtue is, to make others virtuous: one of the best exertions of benevolence is, to teach men to believe and to obey the gospel. And to this duty, as to every other, is announced *the recompence of reward*. To the apostles, as first in dignity and desert amongst the teachers of Christianity, it was promised, that they should *sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel*: and for the encouragement of all others, the prophet has assured us, that *they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness, as the stars for ever and ever*.

Finally and above all, the great end and aim of Christianity is not speculation, but practice; not controversy, but peace: it is not so much the pursuit of science, as of virtue; it is obedience, as well as faith. The glorious scheme of man's redemption was not

communicated to us merely to excite our admiration, and to shew its superiority over reason and philosophy; but to teach us our duty, and to regulate our sentiments and conduct. Futurity is not a land of fancy and fiction; in which we have no further concern than to amuse our leisure or delight our imagination with its beauties; but it is *the lot of our inheritance, the country of our hope*. Christ Jesus is not the creature of poetry, or the hero of a romance; on whose character and actions we need only exercise our critical sagacity, and shew our dexterity in argument; but he is *the author and finisher of our faith*, the example of our morals, and *the propitiation for our sins*. The possession of knowledge superior to the acquisitions of the sages of antiquity will only expose us to a severer sentence, unless we attain to superior merit. *If our righteousness do not exceed the righteousness of the Pagans, they will rise up in judgment against us, and will condemn us*. To hear and to believe the gospel has little use or value, but as the foundation and the principle of religious and moral duties. *Faith without works is dead*. It is only by our prayers and our alms together, by piety united
with

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with charity, that we can render ourselves acceptable to our God. And *do thou, Oh Lord, who hast caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning, grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them; that by patience and comfort of thy holy word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life; which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.*

FINIS.

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